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THUNDERSTORM

BY G. B. STERN

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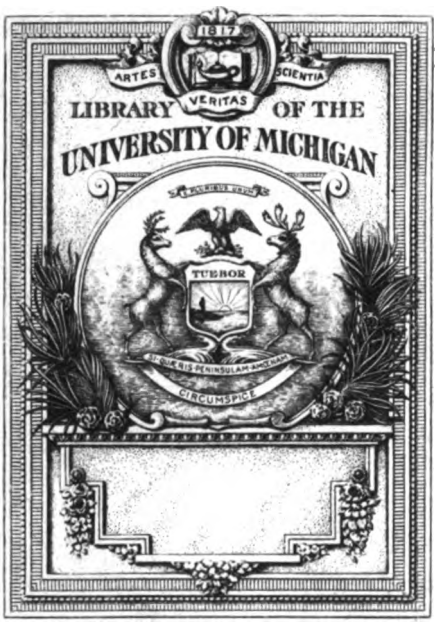

BEQUEST OF
ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

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BY

G. B. STERN

NEW YORK
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PUBLISHERS
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To

ANDREW DAKERS

In warm gratitude
and friendship

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Bequest
Orma F. Butler
4-4-1939

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PART I

WE OTHERS

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[I]

GIOVANNA was hanging up the clothes on a line which sagged between two olive trees. The trees swayed from shining black to dull silver, in the high wind. The clothes flapped and beat themselves out stiffly against Giovanna's face, then perversely bellied in the opposite direction. 'Vanna's robust figure looked as though it were being pinned in twenty different shapes against the crude blue of an Italian sky. She made little marionette gestures of exasperation and despair. Giovanna despaired easily. If Ettore had been there, her husband, Hector, Tamer of Horses, and most certainly tamer of Giovanna, he would have said: "Patience! Have patience! be tolerant and benign, even towards the wind." But Giovanna was of quicker, more nervous blood; besides, she had time, now, to be angry over minor troubles; to hurl herself to the utmost limits of sorrow and fury, when, for instance, the logs were damp, or the mother-hen deserted her chickens and let them run about crying among the beans, or when Marietta could not make up her mind between the two young gardeners; for now Giovanna's life was so

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peaceful and contented, so free from the blacker bogies, that she could allow herself the luxury of noticing these trivial little things; they were not dwarfed by contrast any more, now, since the English had taken La Collina, with herself as cook, and Ettore as —well, it would be difficult to characterize exactly in what capacity Ettore had been taken on; as Providence, perhaps, would come nearest to defining it. Almost, he sent the rain and the sun. He stated the day on which the chickens were to be hatched from their eggs, and when they hatched a day and a half earlier, 'Vanna could not help feeling that the hen had been slightly disrespectful.

There had been bad days, before these.

'Vanna thought about the bad days, as she sat down, exhausted from her tussle with the wind, and with the damp, malignant washing. She still did not understand how Ettore could have failed, when they took their little inn, on the road that leads to Turin, four years ago, when they first were married, Giovanna had married late; she was forty-three now. She would tell you that her life had been a very commonplace one; that she had always been a "povera donna di servizio"—always, that is to say, since the age of fourteen.

She was one of eleven children, and her parents were poor peasants in Piedmont. Fourteen from forty-three leaves twenty-nine; in her bedroom Gio-

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vanna had a huge framed certificate, announcing that, for twenty-nine years, she had been in service as a housemaid, had passed all the tests, and was sober, honest, faithful, and pious. She was proud of her certificate. Still, you may wonder why she had not married before Ettore came along and, of his great kindness, selected her, and made her happy; for she was irresistibly attractive, this poor serving-woman, as she always called herself: a broad, ugly little face, that sometimes reminded you of the Slav, and sometimes of the Irish leprachaun; skin deeply stained, brown and husky red; high cheek-bones, a skyward nose, and bright dark eyes, set slantwise under the blue cloth she wore folded round her head. But it was her smile which was enchanting, her large gay grin that so infectiously brought out the smiles of everybody around her. Artistic people, subtle modern people, when they first saw Giovanna, would tell her that her ugliness was beautiful, that the moulding of her bones . . . 'Vanna would believe none of all this; it was nonsense, of course; she knew beauty—it had a small mouth and a smooth skin and golden hair, like some of the English signorine who came to stay at La Collina. But, as for why she had not married:

"—There was one, signori, who wanted me, but he was violent, rustico. I was afraid of him; I told him that I wished him well, but that he was to go away.

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And then he told a friend that he would shoot me, and she warned me. He was not an honest man, for he came to the front door to shoot me, when he should have gone round to the back. But see Providence, Signori!—because of that, it was not I who answered the door, but Louisa, and she told me who it was, and I went crying to who were then my Signori, and they hid me and sent for the carabinieri. Madonna Mia! . . . But I had no liking for the men after that, until, during the War, I was helping to give soup and coffee to the soldiers in our town, and one of them saw me and asked: 'Who is that?' They told him 'Mà, but that is Giovanna,' and he said: 'I will marry her—she pleases me,' and it was Ettore, signori."

'Vanna spoke the name as though she were pouring it slowly out of the grail; and you asked a few questions, here, about Ettore, for the pleasure of hearing 'Vanna praise him. It was good to know that, in this complicated, tortured and unreverential world, there was still a love so young, so breathless, as the love 'Vanna had for her husband.

. . . "Ettore is of noble birth, signori. Nobody knows it round here, but you can see it by his manner, and not only by his manner, but by his goodness. He will say: 'It is wrong that anyone should cheat our signori' "—and here 'Vanna would throw out her chest and flash her eyes, imitating Ettore's noble

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indignation—" 'It is because they are strangers to this country, and trust us, that they must be treated well!' . . . Ettore *is* così! His grandfather was a count, who wished too well to a girl in the village, and when a little daughter was born, that is, Ettore's mother, he pretended that she was not his; so Ettore's mother grew up poor, and had to work hard, and had nothing but a little pasta sciutta, or a few onions to eat, and she married a poor shoe-maker, who already had several children of his own, and they had a great many more children. But Ettore was always proud, and when he was only a little boy, he said: 'I will not go out to work with the others in the factory. I will find my own way in the world.' Yes, and he ran away, and he walked and walked for a great many kilometres. He walked for three days, and his boots were very bad, and sometimes he asked at the door of a house for a little bread or cold pasta, and at night he was hungry and had no roof." The tears streamed down 'Vanna's face. "Forgive me, signori," she laughed and sobbed and laughed again, "but it makes me cry now, still, to think of the little boy. . . . Life has not always been kind to him. When he married, it was another brutta cosa, for the girl's parents did not tell him that she was already very ill, and poor Ettore had to pay doctors' bills for twenty-four weeks, and then she died, and he had to pay for a good funeral and for his suit of mourning,

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because people would have remembered his wedding suit, had he worn that; it was too soon. Yet he is better than I. When I complain, when I say 'Dio, Dio, but what is to become of us?' he replies: 'Patience, patience, you must have patience. Our Lord, when He was on earth, had to suffer more than this.' But I cannot be patient; it is not in my blood; and what nature has made us, so we are."

Giovanna had a way of causing the dead wood of a platitude to push again into fresh blossom. She could say things that educated, sophisticated, cynical people had heard of and read of, all their lives; but now they were real and new, because 'Vanna had suffered in the proving of them. She could say the equivalent of "Honesty is the best policy," or "To know all is to forgive all," or "Do as you would be done by"—stale old proverbs, but amazingly full of meat and wine . . . now that you could watch 'Vanna working them out.

"Patience!" . . . how Ettore had been right! She could see that now, sitting there, in the shade outside her kitchen door, beside the rosemary bush. He had said misfortune could not go on for ever. Certainly there were still debts to pay in Turin—Oh, but it had been terrible, a disgrazia, when the inn had failed; and everything they had, had been sold; everything, that is to say, except the two old walnut

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night-tables, which they had brought along with them, that they might start furnishing again in this little town of Santa Nucia on the Mediterranean.

Ettore had set up as a photographer. To Giovanna, there was something still mysterious about photography, which lent it a glory. It was connected with dark rooms, and moments when Ettore ceased to be a familiar figure, but a voice that spoke wizardry from under a black cloth. In the window of Ettore's little shop was an enlargement of himself and 'Vanna in their wedding garments; 'Vanna in a high-necked black stuff dress with plenty of whalebone about it, carefully dressed hair, and an expression of swollen concentration; Ettore fierce and noble, with a quiff of curls falling over his Jove-like brow. In the bathing season he had earned quite well, going up and down the beach with his tripod and camera, smiling encouragingly upon the Italian holiday-makers, insisting that the children should stare hard and straight into the lens, while he squeezed the bulb. No profiles for Ettore, no natural grouping, nor sudden trapping of some pose or gesture unaware; it was only amateurs who preferred them, who could not see that photography was a serious business; you had to render your whole soul and body to it, when you were being photographed by Ettore. But the bathing season only lasted two months; and for the

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rest of the year, though he occasionally toiled up to the mountain villages for a festa or a wedding, he really could not make a living by it.

Mussolini had then earned their passionate gratitude by decreeing that every railway official's wife, and every child of every railway official's wife, who wished to travel at the State's expense, must have a photograph taken, and present it at headquarters. Ettore and 'Vanna bought their bed out of the profits of that: a beautiful tin bed, painted to look like polished walnut, so that all who saw it for the first time were deceived, and cried out: "But it's very old, isn't it?" causing 'Vanna to remonstrate, indignant but still polite—"It is *new!*"

It stood now, this treasure among beds, between the two night-tables in the large bedroom set apart for 'Vanna and Ettore at La Collina. Their own private flight of stairs led up to it; and on the wall, between the carved wood and mother-o'-pearl crucifix which 'Vanna had inherited from her grandmother, and the certificate of her meritorious service, was pinned a beautiful, colossal picture which represented, curiously enough, an elephant which had broken loose from a circus in Norwich. Ettore had cut it out of the *Dominica dell' Corriere.* They had selected it, with many exclamations of wonder from 'Vanna, and a lecture on the habits of elephants from Ettore, because presumably it represented normal life

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in that strange land called England; and because it was a compliment to their English padrone to have it on the wall. For 'Vanna now loved the English very heartily; and would lighten into one of her brilliant rages if any of her fellow-men should dare scoff or shrug at those mad ones; because, she asserted emphatically, the English were far from being mad, and it was only the ignorant who could not see that men might all be different, and yet all be good. Some queer habits they had, certainly, her employers! Again out of compliment to them, she and Ettore had slept three nights in June with their window open—at least, no, they had not slept; they had lain dismally awake, feeling the lack of the usual atmospheric cosiness; but not liking to own they were beaten; and on the third night they gave in, and shut the window again, and slept for ever afterwards with their window shut. But still, they *had* tried, for their employers were both fine and cultured, which were the two highest qualities within 'Vanna's power to name; and perhaps so much fresh air and so many baths, hot and cold, had something to do with making them fine and cultured. Other queer habits the English had. They walked often when they could drive; and they sat on the floor; and preferred firelight to any other light; and put their change in their pockets without counting it; and the single men and maidens, wives and young husbands, could pair off

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how they pleased, unchaperoned, without any knives being flashed about. Finally—and here 'Vanna's genial tolerance was strained almost to breaking-point—the English had small appetites for pasta sciutta.

This was terrible, for how could she fulfil herself, how could she create as an artist creates, how express her affection for them, and her gratitude for what they had done for her, if not in gracious terms of pasta sciutta; maccaroni, spaghetti with chopped fungi and garlic, risotto with cockscombs, a round cake of polenta, big as the wheel of a cart, three-cornered gnocci, fried to a crisp brown? How could she create, as an artist creates, these two ultimate masterpieces to show her quality—ravioli that were really succulent baby dumplings, and a dish of bright green home-made pasta—if even these were surprisingly unpopular? Over and over again, the signora had called her in, and had said, half whimsically, but with an undertone of earnest that Giovanna could not mistake: "You must understand, 'Vanna, that the English have small appetites, and the English are not accustomed to eat pasta. We like it, yes, and you make it beautifully. A very good cook is 'Vanna; but if you gave us half this dishful, it would be enough and too much, there would still be some left. Let us have pasta sciutta, shall we say, twice a week in future? And we do not like the polenta at all, it

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is too satisfying . . ." The signora's voice trailed off . . . for 'Vanna was looking at her in sheer anguish. Only twice a week! Not for every meal! Not for collazione and pranzo! But if—but what —Little Marietta voiced it for her, afterwards, in the kitchen; "But if the English do not eat pasta, what then *do* they eat in England?" "I do not know," said 'Vanna, stonily. She could not obey these preposterous orders. Can a bird cease from singing, because it is told not to sing? . . . "Patience!" said Ettore, "Our Lord, when He was on earth, had more to suffer than this!"

[II]

—Would Ettore remember to bring home the electric lamps to form to-night's surprise for the signori? Yes, of course he would. Did Ettore ever forget anything? She, 'Vanna, often forgot—"Testa dura—hard head!" she would exclaim, knocking herself vigorously on the brow. But Ettore never forgot! He had other qualities that were the result of being partially a nobleman; he was a wit, and could do conjuring tricks, and was practical for the rabbits and pigs, besides being a photographer; and everybody took off their hats to him; and he knew how brandy was made. . . . Yes, he did, for once when il Capitano, in halting Italian, had drunk 'Vanna's

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health, he had explained to her the process of making brandy; and she had said in innocent admiration: "Mà—but to think that il Capitano, who is, after all, a sailor, should also be practical for the brandy!" but Ettore, beside her, twitched at her sleeve and muttered: "*I* knew it too, I. I could have explained to you. *I* know how brandy is made . . ." as though he were annoyed. Ettore was also practical for the manure; for when Dobbiaco, his friend, the coachman, had supplied La Collina with manure, and had damped the manure after it had been sold, it was Ettore who had detected that the padrone was being cheated.

Certainly, he was the best husband in all Italy. Giovanna's thoughts roamed to those days, now, when she could allow herself to feel ill and remain luxuriously in bed: "I will bring you your caffé-latte like a signora," Ettore would say, and then he would tie a large apron round his abundant equator, and do all the day's cooking for her, and do it better than 'Vanna. . . . Did he? She was quite sure that one day he was bound to come to her and say: " 'Vanna, the signori have to-day told me that I cook even better than you!" And then he would comfort her for it: "You must not mind, 'Vanna. It is childish to mind these things. Did our Lord, when He was on earth, mind it if another carpenter was said to make a better table?" She was quite pre-

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pared to nod and say: "E vero . . . It is true." "Besides," she could almost hear Ettore saying, in his slow reassuring tones, "it does not mean that you are a bad cook, but that you are good and I am very good."

Only, so far, it was curious—and secretly a relief—that the signori had apparently said nothing of the sort.

[III]

To-day was the anniversary of the day when they had all moved up to La Collina, that low cream-coloured house on the hill outside Santa Nucia. Therefore to-day was a beautiful occasion, for it marked, officially, the end of fear for 'Vanna. She had taken root as quickly and easily as a sturdy little plant suddenly brought into the sun. There had been shade and cold in her soul, even down at Santa Nucia. She had had to go out to one of the hotels as a housemaid, and had worked there hard, all day, for very little wages, and then had gone back to their room which they rented in the house of Dobbiaco, the coachman; but she had seen very little of Ettore, and her bones had ached, and she had not liked Dobbiaco, nor trusted him, and they had been behindhand with their rent, and afraid, quite pitifully afraid, of what might have happened if Ettore had had to give up

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the photography business, or that 'Vanna might have been dismissed during the dead season; afraid as babies that cling together in dread of harshness; afraid, for all Ettore's wisdom and shrewd philosophy. Wisdom and shrewdness that, combined with his unflagging industry, ought to have lifted him into a place by now, more impregnable to the morrow's chances. "But it is because he is noble, and the world is full of men who are not honest," raged 'Vanna. . . .

She had cried often, then. She never cried, now. That was why to-night they must celebrate, in passionate and grateful enthusiasm, the coming of the four English to La Collina. She adored celebration; the putting-on of fancy-dress, or, at least, of festival dresses; everybody good-humoured; a medley of lights and music, pageantry and gay reminiscences; special toasts drunk, special complimenti. She was a true child of Italy in her appreciation of all this. If life could only be a party, she would gladly be a perpetual guest at the party. She loved giving and receiving gifts, thanking and being thanked; she would plead with her signori to invite more and more visitors to La Collina. The work did not matter; the trouble did not matter. They would admire her kitchen; and perhaps, in halting Italian, speak well of the dinner she had prepared for them; and she would bow and smile and say: "You do me hon-

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our!" or "Too many compliments!" and then tell them quickly, her hands all the while cutting vivacious descriptions in the air, of how good the signori were, and how considerate, but never, never, never had she been so happy with anyone before—" "Oh, cut out the song and dance, 'Vanna, *please!*" the signora had interrupted her once, laughing, embarrassed; but the translation of this into Italian had left 'Vanna still bemused, for she was not singing, she was not dancing. And La Signora was certainly an angel, and La Collina a house of good fortune—and had the visitors seen the pigs yet? and—had they seen Ettore? Yes, Ettore had met them at the station, and had been most helpful. He met all the trains when the signori had visitors, and superintended their luggage, and took charge of their tickets, and ordered their carriage. "Faccio io," he said. "Leave it all to me." Once her signora had called out to her, by mistake: "Is 'faccio io' back yet?" and then, reddening, had explained to her that they called Ettore "faccio io" because he could do everything. "It is true," agreed 'Vanna, mightly pleased. Did he not do everything for them? It was right that he should, for he had to repay them for his board and lodging. The arrangement had been made when 'Vanna, housemaid in the hotel where the four English had lived while they looked for a house, had taken their eye with her droll bright face, and had taken

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their fancy with her good-humour and quick receptivity to all joy and sorrow; and they had asked her if she would care to come to them as cook: "That is going to be our villa. Look, you can see it from the window, up on the hill."

"But it is in the country!" cried 'Vanna, for it was fully seven or eight minutes' walk away from the shops and the station, up by the steep little mule-track, and so among the olive-groves. "Yes, it is in the country," she repeated delightedly. "It will be a great change of air, and one need surely never come down into the city at all." And very seriously they agreed; she went on further, and suggested that they could keep their own hens up there, for if a woman has good health, a good husband, and hens, she needs no more to make her happy. . . .

This used to be 'Vanna's slogan. Now, because she was human, and when her wants were satisfied, she still had her wants, she said: "A woman needs only good health, a good husband, and a sewing-machine to make her happy!" —She had not yet acquired the sewing-machine. Perhaps her padrone thought it well to leave something over for Paradise.

"Ettore, shall I ever have a sewing-machine, sometimes I ask myself?" "Patience. First we must live, and then pay our debts in Turin, and then afterwards we save our money, and put it out at interest, and then we buy a sewing-machine!" "But mean-

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while I get old and older. Suppose I should die, and never have a sewing-machine at all?" "Patience. Our Lord, when He was on earth . . ." But for once 'Vanna rebelled against this summing-up of her discontent. Because after all, and she meant no disrespect to the Lord, but He was not a woman, and so He would have been able to support with fortitude the lack of a sewing-machine, not realizing the difference it made. . . .

She had loved that odd-shaped, green-shuttered house on the hill, and had longed to live there and be cook to the English, from that first moment when they had pointed it out to her. But suddenly she remembered she could not come to them; she was married; she could not leave Ettore. "Oh, Ettore can live here, too," they suggested carelessly. "But," argued 'Vanna, "it will be too far for him to go down to the city for all his meals; and besides, it is right that I, his wife, should take care of him." It seemed, however, that the celestial beings who were going to inhabit La Collina, did not even grudge Ettore his meals. "I will consult him," murmured 'Vanna, trembling. They told her to consult him, too, about what wages she would want. That was the way, you see, that the English did things. . . . Italian employers would say firmly that she should receive exactly half the wages that were customary; and she, now stammering, now fluent, blushing, a

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little distressed, but at the same time angry at the necessity, would have to make toilsome ascent of five lire at a time, until she had said "yes" to the very lowest sum possible.

When she came back the next day: "Ettore says thus: That if he eats your food and receives his lodging for nothing, so that we need pay no more rent in the house of Dobbiaco, you must take all this into account, and by so much less pay me my wages, otherwise it would not be fair."

They had looked a little startled at so much honesty. "Well, shall we say two hundred lire a month?" "It is too much," said 'Vanna. And Ettore, on being consulted again, that night, firmly agreed with her that it was too much.

From that moment, he took the four English under his protection. It was obvious that they needed to be looked after, in Italy. All the English were rich, certainly—though the signori had said that they were not—but that was no reason for them to be cheated. So Ettore did all their shopping for them; all negotiations were transacted on their behalf by Ettore; he ordered in their wine, in barrels, and in enormous wicker flasks that the Italians called "dummi-junni." He brought up builders, he brought up carpenters, he brought up cobblers to the house. He interviewed the landlord, and he interviewed would-be gardeners. He registered their parcels, ordered their carriages,

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carried their clothes to the cleaners, hired a boat for them on special terms . . . "Faccio io," said Ettore, and again and again: "Faccio io." He picked up the chimney, when the high wind blew it down one night, and reproachfully put it back into its hole among the red tiles. Another time he waited up till dawn, in the winter, till the signori arrived home, shivering, from a dance at San Remo, and met them in a dining-room ruddy from the log-fire that blazed in the chimney, saying, deliberately off-hand in his manner—how well he knew that such service was unique! —"There is ready, now, hot coffee, hot soup, or hot milk! which will the signori prefer?" . . .

So now, a year after their arrival at La Collina, Ettore, though still in fact a photographer, was in action very much more of a major-domo, a bailiff and a butler, combined with a touch of head-gardener, head-poulterer, emergency-cook, veterinary surgeon, general consultant, cellarer, and hero.

Gradually, the signori left more and more to him. They did not like to be bothered; they were not yet fluent in Italian; they had their work—one of them painted, and one wrote—and besides, they had been warned that all Italy was out to "do" the foreigner; charmingly, blandly, gaily as you please . . . but Ettore stood between them and the blood-suckers, the merry robbers. Twice he had detected a false measure of daily milk, and had pronounced, Jove-like:

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"These things must not be," and had outwitted the milk-woman, and left her wishing she were dead. Whenever the English wanted anything, they would tell Ettore to get it for them; and about once every two months, he would solemnly bring them his book, in which all their expenses had been noted down in such free verse as this:

> Carriage from Alassio, half a sheep from the pastore, drawing-pins and onions . . . so many lire.
>
> Marsala, repairs to boots, two parcels registered to England, and asparagus . . .

or: Hen-house door, castor-oil for signora's friend, 12 cherry trees, load of wood, donkey for transport of wood. . . .

or even: For Keem biting fisherman twice, charity to the padre, coffee, stamps and Kitchen. . . .

When he put down "Kitchen," he meant garlic. Garlic had been forbidden at La Collina, but "noi altri," we others, we still eat it and the padrone will never know—how should he?

Yet the padrone *did* seem to know, three or four times. . . . Ah, he was fine, fine, and cultured! 'Vanna and Ettore adored their employers, but they

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did not see why they should give up garlic for a mere senseless whim.

Thus it was a little difficult to disentangle the various items on Ettore's book. Indeed, the presentation of the book was a mere formality. They looked at the items, a question or two was asked, and then: "Ecco, Ettore!" A wad of notes was pushed over; Ettore very punctiliously appeared, a few hours later, with the change, insisting that these very slack and casual signori should count it. But when the buying of more land was in question, or any extra building on to the house, or the home-farm—the cassina, as 'Vanna proudly called it—then Ettore would have them listen while he unfolded to them all the detailed complications of his dealings, with its ultimate triumph for La Collina, for by now he had identified himself as one of them, and could not bear not to receive applause. He loved applause as much as 'Vanna loved gaiety. "Bravo, Ettore!" they would say, "That was well done!" He stood there bowing and smiling, his hands folded over his stomach, folded over the waistcoat which had once belonged to the signore, and had been made to fit Ettore by simply slashing it down the back and putting in a piece that exactly doubled its girth.

For Ettore was fat. It is not known whether he grew fat because he was pompous, or grew pompous

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because he was fat; but he was magnificent as he stood there bowing and smiling, taking his call, while 'Vanna, unable to resist the pleasure of hearing him praised, hovered about the door, flushed and sparkling, and crying out: "You see, Ettore; I told you how they would be pleased. You see, Signori, how Ettore works for our good!"

[IV]

Suddenly Kim, the little Irish terrier, lying at 'Vanna's feet—the same puppy who had swallowed fifty-lire-worth of fishermen, as testified in Ettore's accounts—sprang alert, and dashed down the path. 'Vanna followed him, with one hand shading her eyes from the sun; yes, here was Ettore. She called out to him in greeting. Behind him trotted the padrone's other dog: "Uatti," they called him, or sometimes "Uattson." They told her it was a name out of a book; so was "Keem," but not from the same book. Uattson was a brown spaniel, a "sport-dog," of a race unknown to 'Vanna until now. Ettore, who adored all animals, was specially proud of him: when rich men on the beach, during the bathing season, admired Uattson, and asked his price, Ettore, puffing out his chest, said superbly: "He is not for sale." Then, being also a business man, he offered to photograph

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Uattson (at the admirer's expense), and to present him with one of them. . . .

"Here is the post," said Ettore, kissing his wife fondly, "and here are the artichokes and the electric lamps. I had to pay for them at once; they would not wait for their soldi. Have you asked the signori—?"

'Vanna's face clouded slightly, but she nodded: "Yes, yes, this morning I asked if it would be convenient. They said you were to bring the book in two days, and they will have the money." But she wished that Ettore would do the asking himself, nevertheless. He was so noble, that he could not. When the daily outlay became too great a strain on his purse, or too great for the already extended credit of the signori, he would complain to 'Vanna; and finally—she dreaded it, but she knew it would come—he ordered her to ask them, when she took up their morning-tea, whether they could make it convenient to pay Ettore, a trifle perhaps, but soon—how soon? . . . A day or two later, they would ring the bell, and send for him. Enter then Ettore, apparently unconscious that any previous prompting had taken place. 'Vanna, standing on the stairs in the doorway between dining-room and kitchen, marvelled at his dignified attitude over the money transactions which so embarrassed and confused her. "We can pay you now,

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Ettore," said the padrone. "I have all the soldi here." "Any time, any time will do," from Ettore, with a fine gesture of refusal. "You disturb yourselves too much. I can wait." Only, of course, he did not have to wait, because once the careless signori had been reminded, they paid. Only 'Vanna did so wish that she did not have to remind them! Yet someone had to do it, and of course it could not be Ettore, otherwise how could he say: "It can wait?" and naturally he always said it, because it was good manners. 'Vanna was convinced that it was not good manners to remind people of their debts, yet what was one to do? Life at moments was a perplexity. Never mind—to-night was festa!

"How will you hang the lamps?" she asked; "And where?" Then Ettore unfolded his great scheme. He was going to write "Evviva La Collina" in green and red lights fixed into a wooden framework right across the front terrace under the verandah window, but, of course, facing outwards, towards Santa Nucia, so that though the Signori and their guests might have to go partly down the hill in order properly to see the illuminations, yet the whole city below would thus have a chance to admire, and to say to each other: "Surely it must be Ettore Puncini, the photographer, who has done this! Who else should it be but Ettore Puncini, the photographer?" They would call their friends out of their houses into the Corso Colombo,

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where the two rows of little orange-trees grew; and people would flock out of the hotels on to the promenade, and they would all say: "Look at La Collina! Look at La Collina! But how beautiful, how artistic, how original! And what expense! What splendour! Is there a celebration up there?" "Yes, indeed! It is the first anniversary of the day when Ettore Puncini, the photographer, and his wife moved in—and the English."

Once before, on another occasion for festa, they had hung lanterns in front of the house; and Ettore had said to Marietta when she came up the next morning: "What are they saying down there about my decorations?" Marietta had told him many things they had said; and he had gone to the Signori, knocking first at the door: "Permesso? I do not disturb? These things they are saying down in Santa Nucia, about my decorations last night . . . " The Signori were glad to be told, certainly, and congratulated Ettore anew on his taste and energy.

"Would it not be better still," flashed 'Vanna, inspired, "to write the words in English, as it is a festa to honour the English?" "Go," ordered Ettore, slowly appropriating the idea as his own, "and ask the Signori what is English for 'Evviva La Collina,' and make them write it down. But do not tell them why—you talk too much, 'Vanna, at times." 'Vanna tiptoed to the door, her finger on her

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lips, her eyes dancing, a pantomime of mute discretion. She came back with the words "Long live La Collina" clearly printed on a sheet of paper. She and Ettore set to work to manufacture the frame, which was to hold the illuminated message. The Musica was coming that night, so all was well. The Musica consisted of four or five of Ettore's friends and protégés, with mandolins and guitars. One of them sang: the sun-room shook when he sang. "Nostaglia," he would sing, and "Funiculi, Funicula," and a beautiful song, 'Vanna's favourite, all about passion—"Passione," he roared, and she looked fondly at Ettore, and then anxiously towards that portion of wall over by the east window, which was not strong, and had broken down once already when the maestrale howled round the house. . . .

Marietta came running in. She had been crying again. Her big, soft brown eyes were red, her pretty mouth sulky. Ettore and 'Vanna were both a little anxious about Marietta. She went home every night, certainly, to her parents in Santa Nucia. Her father was a saddler and harness-maker—a good man, who threw boots at his little daughter, because he believed in discipline, and wished her to remain virtuous. But while she was up at La Collina during the day—"We are as father and mother to her," said 'Vanna, "and therefore responsible." Thus Marietta was certainly encompassed safely and well with fathers and

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mothers, except during her short run up every morning, between the olives, when she was alone. She had been down, now, to the shop for ice. Was it possible that that hot-head, that brutal fellow, had been lying in wait for her again, among the trees? He, the late gardener at La Collina, so jealous of his brother, who had gone to be a soldier now, and to whom Marietta was honestly plighted. Marietta would not say at first what was the matter. Ettore shouted at her. It is the duty of every male parent to shout, so 'Vanna did not interfere. "He had got hold of my letter," sobbed Marietta. "The postman is his friend, and owes him money, so he gave him my letter, that you would not allow to be addressed here, to La Collina, where I would safely get it when Ettore fetches the post." "No, no," 'Vanna interrupted, vehemently. "Ettore is right. Your letters must go to the house of your father where he can read them first. But go on—" "There was a photograph inside—" Marietta, even when agitated, selected her words as daintily as a scarlet-footed pigeon will walk among the maize, and select a grain here and a grain there. "He tore up Stefano's photograph, in front of me, and said 'Never shall you marry him, never! What do you want with that one, who is not here, when I am here, and love you?' And he beat my head against the wall, and I, frightened, called out 'Photographer! Photographer!' but

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he did not hear; and I pulled myself away, and ran."

Her pseudo-parents looked at each other anxiously; then Ettore pronounced judgment: "I will speak to your father. While you are here, you are safe, and while you are in his house, you are safe; but it is better, in the future, that your brother should bring you up in the morning, and fetch you down in the evening. I will speak to your father." Marietta protested. She had very few pleasures, and did not see why she should be robbed of the thrill of having her head banged against the wall by a jealous lover. "But which one is it you want, then?" cried 'Vanna. "You are too soft of the tongue, Marietta, to let your letters be taken from you, and the photograph. You are affianced to an honest man, Stefano, who believes you honest, too. Well, then! be faithful to him, turn round and fight for him. If I had been in your place just now, b-rr-r-r! I should have burnt that other one up. He would have run, his fingers in his ears. I would have spoken to him like this, like this, so that he should never come near me again!" 'Vanna was enacting, all the while she spoke, the scene as she would have played it with the jealous brother of Marietta's lover—her eyes flashing, her hands on her hips, her speech pouring out like an angry river in spate, every line of her body taut and animated. . . . "But you," said 'Vanna, relaxing, "you, I believe, are flattered that two men should

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seek you, instead of one. You do not tell him to take to his legs, as though you meant it. Brrrr. . . . Let him but come to me!"

Marietta murmured a few words to the sink. They could not be heard, because Ettore was using the chopper on the meat, and the noisy blows resounded through the house. Suddenly he stopped the chopper in mid-air. His wife and Marietta, startled at the sudden hush, looked round to see what he was doing. First, he took everything off the table, and carried out the table to a point a little distant from the house; then, he carried out the meat, the board and the chopper. His movements were full of deliberation and mystery. Then he told 'Vanna to call out the padrone, who was sitting in the room they called the "central" room, because it had been the old foundation of the cottage which they had built round it. When the padrone, slightly ruffled at being disturbed from his work, obeyed the summons, Ettore was standing at the table again, chopping meat. "I wished you to see," he said, with a happy smile, "how I have brought everything out here—the meat the table, everything—to do some chopping for 'Vanna, so that you, at your work in the next room, should not be disturbed by the noise in the kitchen. I wished you to see." So that was it! 'Vanna clasped her hands in ecstasy—*she* would never have thought if the noise were being upsetting to her em-

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ployers or not. But Ettore! . . . She heard the padrone mutter something, as after thanking and complimenting Ettore, he returned to the central room; but it was in English. Never could she learn this terrible language: her tongue was too stiff and her head too hard.

She swept together the potato peelings, and took them up the garden to the pigs.

The animals—how she gloried in them! Every morning, at five o'clock, she and Ettore went up to feed them; and Ettore dried the eggs under the sitting hen, that the little ones should be sturdy and beautiful; and 'Vanna, breathless at the miracle, watched the two parent pigeons teaching the two young ones how to make their first flight, pushing them encouragingly, and setting them an example. The chickens, tiny balls of yellow fluff and black fluff that had only been hatched a few days ago, were strutting about, and eating like porters, while their mother clucked approvingly. Eating like porters—the phrase reminded 'Vanna of her father. . . .

[v]

She was not quite sure what she felt about her father.

That journey to Turin in January—it had been terrible; and without Ettore. They could not both

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go, when she received the news that her father was dying, because someone must look after the signori, and see that they were not incommoded by the humble dyings of their retainers' relatives. So 'Vanna travelled alone, separated from her husband, all through the night; and she prayed that her father should pass quietly, and without pain, for perhaps it would be wrong to rebel. "His hour may have come," thought 'Vanna. "After all, he is ninety-seven, and he will be so glad to see my mother again." And then, when she had arrived, and all the brothers and sisters had collected, at much cost and inconvenience, round the patriarch's death-bed, her father had known her. He had held out his hand, and said: "Is that 'Vanna? Stay with me, 'Vanna." Yes, she had been glad, then, that she had made the journey. "Is that Maria?" her father had said. "Stay with me, Maria. And is that Paolo? Stay with me, Paolo." Eleven brothers and sisters in all, and they stayed with him, and the doctor had said: "It is like a candle that flickers, now high, now down, down. . . . Soon it will be out: he can not last the night." And the priest had come, the good priest, and had spoken consoling words, and administered Extreme Unction. . . . For eleven nights running, the priest —such a good man—had administered Extreme Unction. For Giovanna's father had been much respected in Turin for his great age and splendid

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health, so that now he was dying, nobody grudged any trouble. For eleven nights running, the doctor had said: "It is the last flicker of the candle, now up, now down, down" . . . They all grieved so terribly, 'Vanna and Maria and Paolo and the rest, at losing their father. They cried and comforted each other, and said: "It is the will of God," and "It is his hour," and "Our mother will be glad to see him—it must have seemed long without him," and "We must be resigned." And the father had said: "Stay with me, 'Vanna." And Ettore wrote letters that were becoming just a little bit annoyed: "But see, 'Vanna, it is nearly a fortnight now, and I, I cannot stir from the house, nor attend to my business. There is a passport photograph to be taken for the mayor's sister, and now she will carry herself to Porto Filippo, instead, to have it done. Either one's father lives, or he dies—is it not so, my 'Vanna, my treasure? In two days is your Saint's Day, and I have prepared a surprise. To-morrow evening, 'Vanna, that is Thursday, I meet the train." 'Vanna's heart quivered a little, even now, at the pathos of Ettore meeting that train, and the next, and the next, and not finding her on any of them. Poor Ettore! He had been so disappointed. The eve of her Saint's Day—they had always been together before. And, she knew it now, he had pre-

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pared for her a little wooden box, a jewel-case, with a sliding door that opened when pressed in a place that only Ettore knew . . . ("But he who sold you the box, and he who made it, must have known, too?" sagely, from Marietta. "Marietta at times is very stupid," was Ettore's sole response) . . . Yes, he had so looked forward to 'Vanna's bewilderment, and to explaining the mystery to her, and having to explain it several times, because she was not quick, because she was not so understanding in these matters as he. Inside the box, were two plain silver rings: one for him to wear, and one for her. And this box he had tenderly hidden, before going down to meet the train; hidden it under the bedclothes at the bottom of her bed, so that her foot should kick it. She would exclaim: "Dio, what is this?" while he chuckled, and watched her tenderly, and chuckled again to see her fumble. . . . Only she did not come, because how could she leave her father, when he really was dying, and this was the last flicker of all? She had come so far, and to say good-bye like that?—No, she could not do it. It was too cruel. Besides, he had said: "Stay with me, 'Vanna!" . . .

A week later, 'Vanna *did* arrive home. Her father, she explained to the padrone, her poor father, was still dying—he could not last more than a day or two, now. Yes, he had even had Extreme Unction.

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. . . But she was afraid Ettore would be getting angry if she delayed any longer, so she had kissed the old man good-bye. . . . 'Vanna cried, and dried her eyes on her apron, and was resigned. By the next post from Turin, she heard that Paolo, Maria and Lisa, unable to wait any longer, had also said good-bye, and gone to their homes in different parts of Italy; and Luigi and Dimitri went three days later. . . .

—And now they wrote that her father was sitting up, and eating like a porter. He might live a great many years still, said the doctor. Grand news, this! It was not his hour yet, after all, reflected 'Vanna. The good God knows best. Nevertheless, she wondered, could not help wondering, even though she was being wicked, whether the priest—such a good man—felt quite as much of a fool as she had felt, for example, whenever her employers asked her if her father were still alive? 'Vanna, tactfully, and at the same time seeing her way towards a graceful and sincere compliment, replied: "After all, signora, it is as well, perhaps, that it was not his hour, though I made that long journey; for now I can wear, in the summer, that blue dress for festa, of which you brought me the stuff from England. It would have been a pity not to have worn it—so costly, and in such good taste."

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[VI]

—"Aggambe!" cried 'Vanna to the cock, and flapped her skirt in his face. She did not like the cock. He was necessary, yes, but he was too superb, and had not a good character. She loved the chickens best, and the young pigeons—especially the young pigeons, for she, and not Ettore, had first discovered the eggs in their box. She had been angry with Ettore. . . . Yes, that happened sometimes, but not often. He had stayed down there, in the city, in the bar, drinking mandarino-punch with Dobbiaco and other well-known roysterers in Santa Nucia; and she had been up there so anxious, thinking every minute something had happened; thinking there had been an accident; thinking: "Madonna mia! What shall I do, if he never comes back? How shall I bear it? Where shall I go?" To and fro, between the kitchen and the top of the path that led down the hill—and when, at last, he had appeared, not drunk, but a little more slow and dignified than usual, she, in her relief, had railed at him shrilly, poured out her dark stream of anxiety on his head, in a rush of words. But he had said: "Patience, patience! What sort of a man is it who does not stay out, because he is afraid of his wife? Be tranquil, 'Vanna. What should have hap-

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pened to me? I, who have been through the War; I, who have been a prisoner in Servia and slept out many nights in the snow, and toiled up the mountains at Caparetto, while the Austrians turned their guns upon me from the heights—what should happen to me in Santa Nucia?"

No, he could not understand how a woman felt. How should he? It was not right that a man should understand. He was not a real man, if he did, and one would not love him. But still, early the next morning, when 'Vanna was out first because she could not sleep, and he slept heavily, she found the first pigeon's egg, warm and ivory, in the straw, and she did not tell Ettore; that was her revenge. She waited until he had gone down to the shop, and then she told the Signora and the Signorina Elizabeta and the padrone and il Capitano. All day she did not tell Ettore. It was evening when the signora, meeting him on the garden path, hailed him with cheery congratulations—for, of course, they always congratulated Ettore whenever there was a birth in the home-farm.

"Well, Ettore, so the first pigeon's egg has been laid!"

"Not yet," said Ettore, positively; "on Saturday."

"No, to-day. I have seen it."

"You have seen it," Ettore repeated, stupefied. Then, suddenly, he dashed into the kitchen.

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"'Vanna, 'Vanna! Is this true? Why have I not been told?"

. . . Dio, but he was angry! To think that the Signora should have made the announcement to him, and not he to the Signora. To think that he should be the last to know, whereas he was always the first! Dio! . . . But 'Vanna could be a veritable brown goblin of mischief, sometimes. She was still delighted, when she thought of the affair of the pigeon's egg.

The Signori were very interested in the farm. At first, when 'Vanna had sighed for hens, as men sigh for gold, and monks for Paradise, they had shaken their heads, saying they had not the money, that hen-houses were costly. But then Ettore had talked with them, and made them see that, because of his mysterious friendship with the station-master, and because of a certain load of wood which Marietta's father had acquired cheaply, and because of other deep-laid transactions, plots, negotiations, and obligations, the hen-houses need cost practically nothing, and, at all events, they need not be paid for until it was convenient to the Signori—in six months perhaps, and even then, if it was still not convenient to the Signori, he, Ettore, could meanwhile pay; and when it was convenient to the Signori, they could repay him—and anyway, it would cost nothing, so . . . So the hen-houses had gone up, and the pig-

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styes. 'Vanna and Ettore had been very excited about the pig-styes. Ettore had strolled down to Casa Rosso, the villa at the foot of the hill, where English friends of the Signori lived, and had told their cook, Lucia, positively, that he must see the Signora—"On business," he said,—and had been shown into a room, and had stood there silent for a moment, making signs that he was not disturbing them at their breakfast. . . . Then, still silently, he had beckoned the Signora Barbara to arise and follow him, and he had led her round the whole house to a certain window, which alone commanded a view of the road towards the East, and had said: "If the Signora will look—"

The Signora looked, and saw the sea and the sky and the road, and between the sky and the sea, one straight and gracious palm-tree. "If the Signora will look," repeated Ettore, impassively, "she will see—a cart—carrying the wood—which is to build the sty—to keep the pig—of the Signori at La Collina." And there, certainly, coming up the road, had been a cart, containing some planks of wood and Marietta's father—her good father, who threw boots at his daughter that she might not leave the path of virtue.

And now there were sixty-six mouths to feed at La Collina! Sixty-six, 'Vanna counted joyously; sixteen hens, and the seventeenth which was broody, and

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the cock which was not simpatico, and two pigs, and the two parent pigeons, and the two young pigeons, and the two pigeons still in their eggs—could one count them as mouths? "But yes," reflected 'Vanna. "They have mouths, the little hidden ones, surely!" And then there were twenty-two chickens and four rabbits and the eleven baby rabbits, and the two plump ones which took all the milk their mother had to give, and so grew stupid for lack of brothers and sisters to share abundance with them; and the rabbit who had not yet had a family—obstinate, in spite of the benevolence with which Ettore had twice bestowed her hand in marriage upon the male rabbit; he had said only yesterday that he would give her another week, and then—then they should be married again, and for the last time: "And if nothing . . . She goes in the pot!" quoth Providence.

'Vanna's eyes twinkled and beamed at the sight of all this warm and teeming atmosphere around her, of life and giving life, young things and mother-love; suck . . . suck . . . soft rustlings in the straw, the stir of wings in their first flight, dropped feathers, the first stumbles, the first eager peckings at their food—"Che merveglia! . . ."

She had no babies.

Every morning, when she took the signori their tea, and when she had not to make embarrassing demands for repayment of debts to Ettore, she would say:

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"Buon giorno, Signori. Did you sleep well? Another day of sun, but again too much wind. Ah, well, one can but wish it will soon pass. Ettore and I have already been up since five o'clock, feeding the animals, cleaning out their homes. The Signora must get up one morning early, and see for herself how beautiful it is—the little ones up there, and their mothers, doing cosí and cosí . . ." 'Vanna strutted, and pecked at imaginary food, clucked, and waved her arms as though they were wings. "And the broody hen, she will not leave her eggs, not even to eat. Ettore has to pull her off, and give her food, and put her back again. She is so warm and full of tenderness. Ah, Signori, Nature is so beautiful, so beautiful—all these little animals . . ." 'Vanna was ecstatic, incoherent in her attempt to express that great surge of wonder that pushed up in her breast and poured into her heart, every morning. And the padrone, he said: "I mean to keep a goat, 'Vanna, quite soon, and have goats' milk, and a kid." 'Vanna's rapture died away swiftly; her animated face clouded. "But yes," she replied woodenly; then hesitated, and said no more. Should she tell the padrone that she was afraid of a goat, that she was not practical for goats, that it would run at her, and butt her with its horns? They would think her so foolish; they would cry: "'Vanna—'Vanna is a coward!" Besides, if the Signori wanted goats, they

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must have goats. She must be obedient, she must be resigned, but she could not pretend any joy. She saw them watching her closely, and they looked at each other and smiled: "Out with it, 'Vanna! What is it? What is wrong with goats?" It was not in 'Vanna to be reserved or inarticulate for long; nor would she ever have understood the difficulties of those who are tongue-tied, who repress their emotions. "Signori, look! It is this. I am afraid of a goat. I know it—I will run, and the goat will run after me. I am not fine and cultured, or I would not be afraid, perhaps. But if the Signori want it, I will tell Ettore to buy one."

They had bought another pig instead. It was all right—there were no goats in the Garden of Eden.

[VII]

'Vanna went round to the pigs next, and, armed with a thorny branch of olive, took them out for a short walk. They ran about her, squealing, pushing against each other, pushing against her feet. She called to them shrilly: "Giacomo! Antonino! eh! cattivo!" They had no excuse not to be superpigs, for on Easter Monday, when the bells from all the campanile were ringing the Gloria, the household had gathered on the terrace in front of the kitchen—'Vanna and the signori and il Capitano and the sig-

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nora from Casa Rosso, Ettore and Marietta, the pigs and Keem and Uattson, to wash their eyes and any part of their bodies that hurt, with water from the hip-bath which Marietta had filled; for all the water in Italy, all the water in the world, was, for the space of these moments, blessed and able to heal, so 'Vanna had told her signori. She, herself, had gone modestly to her room, for she had been afflicted with pains lately in the small of her back. Ah, such pains! But now, certainly, after washing, they would be better. 'Vanna came out of her room again, smiling all over her face, and saw that Ettore and the padrone were dipping the pigs in the bath, and the signora was looking a little bit doubtful: "Is this all right, 'Vanna?" she had asked. "But why not, signora? They will grow strong and well, and they will fetch big prices by Christmas—as much as two thousand lire each—from the butcher." And between intervals of dipping and praying, while the soft bells from all the scattered mountain villages added their peal to the great swinging chime from Santa Nucia, Ettore gave the padrone a good deal of useful information about the rearing and habits of pigs. . . . And 'Vanna told the signora the well-known story of that good and pious woman whose husband drank, and hit her more than most husbands, and left her alone while he followed others; and she had said to him, while the Gloria

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was sounding: "Come, put a little of this blessed water where you have your rheumatism, and you will be cured, by the mercy of the Virgin and the Saints." And he, the unbeliever, the husband, had laughed and cursed, and said: "Not I!" and she, trembling, had pleaded: "If only to make me some pleasure—I pray of you, do it." And so, still cursing, he had done it—

—"But I do not give them grano turco while they are still so young, signore. No, I am practical, I! First they must make bone, and then grow fat. I had a pig once, I, and all the neighbours said to me: 'But, Ettore, how is it your pig is so much finer than our pigs?' and I replied: 'It is because I, I—'"

—"So the husband, not believing, yet to be rid of her, put holy water on his rheumatism—and see, signora, it fell from him, the rheumatism, cosí it fell from him, and he dropped on his knees, and thanked the Saints, and from that moment he did not beat his wife, and when he died, they made him a saint, too. So you see, signora, it is a good thing that we all should believe that the water is blessed and can heal, when the Gloria is sounding, after for three days the bells have been silent."

"But, 'Vanna," the signora had argued. "Surely it should have been yesterday, Sunday, that the bells sounded for the Ascension? To-day is Easter Monday." "Ettore will explain," 'Vanna had said, mis-

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trusting her own abilities suddenly. "Ettore knows." And then Ettore had told them about the quarrel between the Church and the Government—something to do with holidays and Labour and the Fascist party and the Pope. . . . 'Vanna had not been educated enough to understand, but it had meant that the Ascension had to be a day late, because the Government had ordered it. "Are you on the side of the Fascist party or the Communisti?" il Capitano had asked; and Ettore had replied, with a gesture: "A photographer should have no politics!" . . . and sprinkled the broody hen with what was left in the bath; so that the signora remarked again: "Should the animals really share in this ritual, 'Vanna?" "But why not, signora? Why not the animals? We cannot tell that they are pious, truly, but also we cannot tell that they are not pious, povere bestie! It can do no harm."

—And indeed, the pigs were doing well!

Three days after Easter, the priest had arrived in his robes, splendid scarlet robes, to bless the house, as was the custom, so that it should prosper. 'Vanna had received him, and he had gone from room to room, sprinkling them, and muttering Latin prayers. No, 'Vanna could not understand Latin; but she liked to see La Collina, for the first time, receive its Easter blessing. Two little boys had followed the priest, carrying a basket to hold such gifts as some house-

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holds might choose to give rather than soldi. And 'Vanna had put six of their own eggs, Collina eggs, in the basket, and had given, as well, three whole lire. It was the padrone's order to give so much, for 'Vanna had thought a few soldi enough, in addition to the eggs; one must be thrifty; but the English were too generous. And then she had invited the priest into the kitchen—"But, of course, the kitchen, signora. Where else should he come? With whom should he eat, but with us others?" One glass of wine, that was all the padre had accepted, though he liked wine, she knew, but he had to get on to the many other houses scattered among the olive-slopes, and bless them, and drink some wine at each, and be given eggs and soldi.

[VIII]

Certainly La Collina prospered, now. Of all the family, only one rabbit died, and that was not the fault of Ettore, but of Providence and the good God, who had so willed it. . . . "A casa, Giacomo! Té! té! Antonino!" . . . 'Vanna shut up the pigs once more, shook out a little grain through the sieve among the crowding hens, glanced defiantly at the cock, and then trotted back to the house. To-night there was festa; she must not forget.

That afternoon, Ettore had actually some photo-

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graphs to take. The Society of the White Cross was going to Andora and back in a procession, bandaging and healing all who demanded succour, as the carts jolted along the dusty road. Ettore and his apparatus were in one of the carts. He would not be home until dinner-time, if then. 'Vanna devoutly hoped that he would be in time to play host to the Musica. Once, she remembered ruefully, a Musica had been ordered for the evening; and il padrone, who had been away, was expected home by the five-forty train, and did not come. Ettore remained down at the station that evening, obstinately meeting all the trains. He gave orders before he left, that if he were not back by the time the Musica came, 'Vanna was not to give them wine, but to wait for him. The Musica played, and played, and played; and every half-hour or so, the signora would say to 'Vanna: "'Vanna, don't you think a little wine—?" But 'Vanna, obedient to commands, had said firmly: "No wine until Ettore comes, signora. It is Ettore who gives the wine. Ettore is down at the station, meeting the trains by which the padrone might come." So the Musica played and played and played again. . . . 'Vanna knew they were getting thirstier and thirstier, and the signora knew, and the signora's friends said: "Are the Musica never going to have anything to drink?" "Not until Ettore comes home." —Ah, but it had been terrible. She had

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found a little wine, less than half a litro perhaps, in a flask they had had at lunch, and had given it to the eldest member of the Musica, because he suffered from a cough—and then they had played and played and played, again and again. . . . It seemed like a nightmare, in which trains would come in for ever, bringing no padrone, and Ettore would never come home, and the Musica would play for ever, and never have any wine. . . . But he was stern, Ettore; when he said a thing, he meant it. It was not right, it was not seemly, that men should be given wine in a house where there were no men to give it.

At last, in almost visible disgust, the Musica had gone home.

The padrone returned on the milk-train.

'Vanna reminded Ettore of this, before he went off to join the White Cross expedition to Andora, and he promised reassuringly to be home in time for dinner. "Let Marietta fetch the post, and you, 'Vanna, will have to finish making my illuminated decoration. It is hardly begun yet."

"Ettore!" cried out 'Vanna, in anguish, as his broad and dependable shoulders disappeared down the path. "Hé, Ettore!"

He returned.

"We had forgotten," said 'Vanna, "the two little trees at the hour of half-past three!"

"Dio!" Ettore considered the problem: A year

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ago, at the hour of half-past three, the signori's carriage, containing eight doors and the signori themselves, had jolted up the road—the 'bella strada,' as the landlord perfidiously called it, trying to hypnotize his tenants by the words—and had stopped in front of the steep path that led up to La Collina. Twenty-seven minutes past three was the exact hour of taking possession. Therefore, as this was the anniversary, Ettore had had the idea of buying a present for his employers: two baby cypresses; and of planting them in the garden at exactly twenty-seven minutes past three. He visualized the signori applauding the surprise, and exclaiming: "But, Ettore, too many compliments! But what a good idea! But what excellent trees! Yes, Ettore is indeed the man for inspirations of the most original, and at the same time, of the most fine and cultured!" . . .

Well, but now this expedition to Andora—it was business. Ettore was a man of sentiment; and, also, he truly loved both the flourish and the aftermath of social ceremony; but, above all, he was a man of business. The carts of the White Cross must not go to Andora and back, without an accompanying photographer. 'Vanna watched him breathlessly: her brow was contracted, her mouth puckered. Suddenly, as she knew it would, his face lightened: "'Vanna, this is what we will do! It is a quarter

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to one. We will bring out the trees now. The signori will not remember that it was half-past three when they drove up to the house a year ago; it is only noi altri, we others, who remember. We will all tell them, you and I and Marietta, that it was at ten minutes to one, and they will believe it—and then I can go to Andora when the planting is over. It need not take long. I can put them in deeper to-morrow, when the occasion itself is over." 'Vanna clasped her hands in rapture—then doubt overcame her. "Would it matter," she asked, "that it is not true? Would it not be telling the signori a lie, to tell them that they arrived last year at ten minutes to one?" Silence. Then Ettore said slowly: "If the signori could be asked, which they cannot or it would spoil the surprise and spoil the occasion, but if they could be asked, I think they would prefer to have this little mistake made about the time. We must therefore act according to our honest belief of what they would prefer. Hark! There is the bell. Go, 'Vanna, and ask them to do us the honour of assembling in the garden, beyond the verandah, and to wait there for what will happen."

The bell sounded again. It was an elegant metal bell, a bell fit for a mayor. You banged the top with the flat of your hand, to ring it. 'Vanna and Ettore had bought it on behalf of the signori. The signora, who painted pictures, had asked 'Vanna if Ettore

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could possibly procure them a bell such as they hang round the necks of cows—"But without letters on it," said la signora. "I have seen them with a name painted on, such as 'Alassio,' but I want this one plain, a simple cow-bell." "But, signora, what do you want it for?" "Why, to ring at table, 'Vanna, or when we want you, or Marietta, for anything." "But, signora, it would properly displease me. . . . See, I know you mean me no harm, for you do not know the country, but let me explain that it will be the same as calling me a cow, if you call me by this bell." The signora had laughed. She did not understand; and 'Vanna had to elaborate, very seriously, on the point that there is nothing, nothing, worse in Italy than to call a donna a cow—una vacca. They had tried to reason with her: "But, 'Vanna, a cow is such a nice animal. We get milk from a cow." But no, she would not allow them to use a cow-bell. She had pleaded with them; and grimly she had warned them: "In Italy they can put you in prison if you are heard calling anyone a cow. You do not understand, signora. I will do as you say, because I must, because I am your donna di servizio; but it will be as if something turned over in my heart, whenever I hear you ring it." So hastily, the signora, who was so kind, had protested that something must not turn over in 'Vanna's heart, and that any other kind of bell would do. So they had bought this elegant

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one, and the signori were very pleased. They told her it was like the bells used in ristoranti, all over London, by someone called Signor Ly—ons. . . .

So now 'Vanna answered the summons, without need to shrink from any insult contained therein. They wanted a "replica" of the soup: it had Marsala in it, and it was the padrone's favourite. He liked it very strong; in fact, he had once said to Ettore: "I do like a little soup in my Marsala, sometimes." "Cosi, signore?" Ettore had replied, puzzled, for the request could surely not be serious; "The signore means that he likes a little Marsala in his soup?" But when he had repeated the signore's mistake to 'Vanna, she had laughed heartily, holding both her sides. . . . "Mà! but he jokes with you, Ettore!" "A joke without sense!"—Ettore could not realize that in matters of the spirit and the funny-bone, 'Vanna was the one who excelled.

[IX]

To-day, the day of the festa, when the bell summoned her, she had no time to smile and bow and be pleased, and to say: "You do me honour, you do the cook honour," as she usually did, when they demanded a replica. "Will the signori all come out into the garden for a little surprise, an improvisatore? . . ." With many expressions of wonder,

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they arose, and followed her out. "What can it be?" they said: and 'Vanna was delighted. She adored an atmosphere of expectation. She bustled into the kitchen to fetch her tree. Ettore already had his. Marietta followed with a trowel. They advanced in single file. Ettore stopped in front of the signori, and explained: At this exact moment, a year ago, the signori drove up to La Collina, and took possession. He and 'Vanna wished to celebrate the anniversary by planting these little trees. It had been a very happy year. The signori had been so good to them. They all loved their home. Might the signori live to sit under the shade of these trees, which they were now planting. . . .

'Vanna prompted him—she could not help bursting in: "And their babies, Ettore! May the bambini of la signora dance round the trees, and the bambini of the bambini!"

"Be quiet, 'Vanna," said Ettore, in an undertone. "One does not mention that now. Suppose the signora shall have no babies, what would you feel like, then?"

'Vanna subsided, feeling snubbed. She did so hope there would be children at La Collina. But now Ettore was finishing his speech, and she was glad, for her arms ached from holding aloft the little cypress in its pot; and now he was on his knees, digging a hole in the earth with his trowel, superbly motion-

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ing away the padrone, who would have helped him. The trees were put in—provisionally, and not very deep, for the cart of the White Cross was waiting for the photographer; and the signori briefly returned thanks. They would probably say more about the good works of Ettore that evening, when healths were drunk.

[x]

'Vanna was not absolutely happy, as, back in the kitchen again, she busied herself with the washing-up. . . . If only it had not been necessary to tell that one small lie; because now, at half-past three, twenty-seven minutes past, she was feeling very uncomfortable, knowing that this really was a significant moment, drifting by unproclaimed. Would the signori notice it? She was a tiny bit suspicious that they *had* noticed; she thought they had quickly glanced at each other, when Ettore had specified ten minutes to one, as the time of their arrival, a year ago. Had they noticed, and been kind, and not said anything? If so, the more honour to them; but she would have preferred to have told them, frankly and volubly, about the White Cross and business and their needing so badly all the soldi they could get, to pay their debts in Turin. This Ettore would not have allowed; and he could make her feel, by arguing, that he was

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right, that it would be selfish and fussy for her to allow her scruples to spoil the perfect celebration. 'Vanna sighed—Mà! life was not always easy. . . .

She could not help laughing as she recalled, for Marietta's benefit, that arrival with the eight doors. They had grown so tired of waiting to move in, and the house had indeed been ready for over ten days, except for its doors and windows, which the carpenter had not delivered. He was a bad subject, that carpenter! Again and again had the signore come down to him, to hustle him into completing the work for La Collina; and Ettore had been down, and the impresario—the master-builder—and the landlord . . . sometimes they had all been down together, and sometimes singly; and the carpenter's only response had been to send up his two sons to paint and hang the shutters; "To keep out thieves, are they?" 'Vanna had railed at them, "thieves who will not see the empty doorway to come in by, no!" Most of the furniture was in, and one carpenter was fixing shelves, and another was putting in cupboards, and another taking measurements for the wire netting mosquito-windows; and still La Collina had no doors. "Yes, they are done," the old carpenter had snarled, disagreeably. "I will send them up after mid-day." "After mid-day next year, yes!" 'Vanna prophecied. "After mid-day" was what he always said; and after mid-day they had not come up, nor the

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next day, nor the next; till, at last, the padrone had lost patience, and had said: "To-night we all sleep at La Collina, whatever happens. Do you hear, Ettore? Do you hear, 'Vanna?—if I have to fetch the doors myself. So bring up your own things, and we will meet you there, round about three o'clock."

'Vanna and Ettore had brought up their possessions: their tin bed, and the two walnut night-tables, and a pot of rosemary, all heaped up on a large barrow; and they had sat outside and waited; and presently the signori had arrived, sitting high up on the pile of wooden doors, Dobbiaco driving the carriage and laughing heartily—the old villain!—"But we could not help laughing, too. You do not remember, Marietta; it was before you came. Dio, but the house was full of carpenters; they all left what they were doing, and helped to hang up doors; and Ettore gave orders; and that night we *did* sleep at La Collina. But had not the signore gone down to fetch them, I believe we would still be waiting until 'after midday,' when the doors would be sent up!" . . .

Presently Marietta went down for the afternoon post; and 'Vanna sat quietly working to fix the little lamps into the shape of letters, in a frame Ettore had prepared. "Long live La Collina!" She had got as far as "lon" of the first word, when Marietta returned! "There is one for you, 'Vanna." It was

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from 'Vanna's niece at Turin. Slowly and painfully she spelt it out. Even then it puzzled her. Apparently there had been misfortune, of which 'Vanna knew nothing. 'Vanna's niece's husband had written to Ettore, telling him some time ago—a month ago, perhaps. Now the niece was writing to 'Vanna, saying how glad she was that Ettore had been able to pay back the whole sum, which he had borrowed from them when his albergo had failed in Turin, and there had been creditors to satisfy. 'Vanna's niece's husband had been prosperous, the manager of a large caramel business, but now—could it be? Dio, che disgrazia!—The business had failed. He had lost his job. Another baby was on its way to bless them, making five little ones in all. He had been forced to ask for his money back at once, instead of spread over several years, as had been promised, and—this was the part that 'Vanna could not understand: "We were so glad, cara zia, when the good Ettore sent it to us so promptly: the whole three thousand lire. I do not know what we should have done without, with my illness, and my poor Mario so sad and troubled. I was afraid what he would do, so I prayed that the worthy Ettore would be able to send the money, yet not having much hope, really, knowing that you both only earn a little, and have not much saved yet. But see how the good God answers our prayers! And so Mario will be able to start

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again, with this capital, a little caramel business of his own. You will have seen his letters to the worthy Ettore, of course, but now that I am well enough, I felt I had to write to you, because it is you, cara zia, who first taught me to pray" . . .

All this took 'Vanna a long time to read. She simply could not understand; as soon as possible, she would ask Ettore; he, of course, would explain, so that all which seemed now so confused, would be simple again. Why he had not told her, had been to spare her worry—of that 'Vanna was certain. But how had he been able to repay so much? Three thousand lire to Mario and Teresa! From whom could he have borrowed it? And—Madonna mia! at how high an interest? Huge sums like that, she knew, could not be procured by holding out the hand. Mario and Teresa had lent it to them at the time on easy terms, because Teresa had always been 'Vanna's favourite niece, and they had been good friends, and one did much for friendship and love; and then, too, it was all in the family. But this poor Ettore! How he must have suffered when he received that letter, which he had concealed from 'Vanna, asking desperately for three thousand lire immediately, without delay! Ettore was noble; he had said nothing; he had gone about his work as usual. Had the padrone lent it to him? No, because otherwise Ettore would not have told 'Vanna to ask the padrone for the

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money to settle up two months' expenses. The signora had often explained to her the reason why they let their accounts run on for so long: it was because her husband, il padrone, was an author; not a man of commercial affairs; and very often the cheques were sent off to them several weeks later than they expected; so they had to go on owing Ettore and the shops. "It is quite safe, you see, 'Vanna, the money, only often it is late." But that proved, 'Vanna argued ferociously, with her bothering, tormented brain, that proved that Ettore could not have had the money from the padrone, because the padrone had always less ready money actually in his pocket than they all needed to live on.

If only it were not borrowed from Dobbiaco! That villain, with his curly grey hair, and wide, bland, toothless smile! Yes, she owned it, now that there was no one to hear her: she hated Dobbiaco, and she feared him. He kept Ettore late, sometimes, down at the bar at Santa Nucia. "Patience," murmured 'Vanna, trying to apply to herself Ettore's precepts. "If the money is paid—well then, there is nothing to worry about. Had Teresa been ill and in need of money, and you had not been able to pay it, that would have been terrible; but it is paid, and Teresa is happy again, and, for the rest, Ettore will arrange it. I need only wait until I can ask him to-night. Patience!" . . . But no, it would not do; she was

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impatient; she had fever in her blood; she was all quick flames; quick desires, quick laughter, quick wrath; and tears, quickest of all. It was easier for Ettore to be calm, because, as he said himself, his temper was phlegmatic—hers was a nervous temper. She loved life so much, she loved happiness and gaiety so much, that she could not bear to see them running, running away like water. . . . You could not hold water when it began to run. . . . Patience! To-night is festa! Musica—a special dinner to prepare—surprises for the signori. Afterwards, she and Ettore would dance, while the signori applauded, and the Musica played faster and faster. And everybody down in Santa Nucia would say: "Look, there are lights up at La Collina! Look, what is written in lights?"—

Yes, indeed, it was good to be cook at La Collina. She had been happy for a whole year. Was that too much? Providence would not take it away from her now? or had she been too secure? "I cannot wait!" cried 'Vanna, desperately, to the empty kitchen. Marietta had gone up to find how many eggs there were. Just to-day, when she needed him so much, Ettore was gone where she could not follow him. He would be half-way to Andora by now; and when he came back to-night, it would probably be in company with the Musica; he would pick up his friends on the way, and they would come playing their guitars

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and fiddles, softly at first, all the way up the hill. And the second he came in, there was so much for him to attend to, always—the illuminations, the wine—that probably he would have no time, even to eat his own dinner. But Ettore never minded that; he was not greedy, like some, like Dobbiaco. Only she would not be able to have him alone until late, after all the guests had departed, and the signori were in bed, too. And then he would be tired, the poor man, and say: "Patience, 'Vanna! The morning is also a good time."

No help for it. She must wait.

—"Eleven eggs!" cried Marietta, triumphantly entering with a basket. 'Vanna touched them lovingly; she liked to feel their warmth—so different from eggs you bought in a shop. They made her feel that La Collina was home, the safest home she had had for many years, the safest she had ever had. Somehow, caressing these eggs, white and brown and creamy, gave her back her confidence. They were so real. She had watched the hen-houses go up. She knew which hens had laid the brown eggs, and which the white. They laid eggs for her every day. These are things that go on, for years, and for many years; go on safely and serenely, until cypress trees shall grow tall, and fling a long thin shadow on the ground, and children shall dance round them. . . . These are things that go on. It is when you are al-

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ways packing, always moving, always fretting, that you get afraid. Change is a fearful thing. If you stay in one place, if your rosemary bush remains planted and grows big, beside the staircase to your own room; if you see always the same hills, the same olives, from your window, and the vines turning copper and red below the olives in September; if every spring the leaves, like bright green wings, show suddenly on the dead silver-wood branches of the wild fig—these are things that go on, and you reach confidence, and you are afraid no more. So 'Vanna lifted one of the eggs, the last that had been laid, and the warmest, and held it against her cheek, and smiled to think how happy they all were, here, up at La Collina.

[XI]

Ettore arrived home, as 'Vanna had expected, with the Musica, so that it was quite impossible to talk with him then. He was full of a sort of excited importance, carefully controlled to look like perfect calm. First, he ushered the Musica into the sun-room, and told them to wait there quietly, to make no noise, not to sit down, not to touch anything. Then he closed the door on them, as though they were dangerous. Next, he went to the signori, and told them about the afternoon's events on the road to

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Andora and back; how he had discovered a different kind of cheese, better than any other cheese he had yet procured for the signori; and how, as a special privilege, he might be able to negotiate for its purchase. Also, he wished to know if the signori required an electro-plated soup-tureen? No? Very well then, the signori need not disturb themselves—there was no necessity to have it. Finally: "The Musica is on the verandah—when the signori are ready?" Yes, they had heard the Musica coming up the hill, softly playing. Ettore passed on into the kitchen: "I want no dinner, 'Vanna, there is no time. Where are the lamps? Where is the decoration? The Musica is here, and the signori want their coffee, and the lanterns are not yet lit!"

She caught some of the infection of the bustle and gaiety of a party about to begin. That letter—it could wait! After all, Ettore was an alchemist: he turned all that he touched into gold. She could trust to him, and he would put everything right. Later on, she would be ashamed of the uneasiness which had followed her steps like a shadow all day. Marietta, who was in love with at least two of the Musica—that girl did not know how to be faithful to one good man; no matter, she would learn!—Marietta lifted up the immense wooden frame, on which she and 'Vanna, following Ettore's directions, had been at work. The word "Long" was written in

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coloured lamps—"Is that all?" demanded Ettore. "Where is the rest?"

'Vanna flared up: "Mà, we have been at work all the afternoon, Marietta and I. Could we tell that it would take so much time? If we had to write all that which you had planned, we should still be at it, and without dinners and breakfasts, for a week, for a month from now! 'Evviva' by itself, that is good enough! 'Long.' Go, hang it up, and light it! quickly, now!" She rushed and shooed him out of the kitchen, in pretended wrath.

Ettore planted the construction, as planned, well away from La Collina, and with its back to the house and to the signori in the house. Furthermore, he festooned a row of gay paper lanterns along the outside wall of the verandah, called Marietta, and ordered her to bring the kitchen table and a candle. The table was for him to stand on. In his precise and solemn manner, he performed the rite of lighting candles in each lantern. Next, he switched on the little electric lights of his masterpiece: "Long," in letters of fire . . . yes, really, it looked very well. Then he went to the bottom of the path, and contemplated his handiwork from there: it was beautiful, original, and yet educated. He wondered what they were saying about it down in Santa Nucia; he wondered especially what the English down there were saying. There were always a good many English in

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the hotel: "From outside the station, too, where the trees part, they will view it well!" . . . Santa Nucia, for the nonce, existed only as a number of different points from which good aspects might be obtained of Ettore Puncini's decorations at La Collina. And still he stood there, entranced, hypnotized into rigidity by what his own brain and hands had called into being . . . until he heard voices, and the thrumming of guitars, which signified, to his horror, that the signori and the Musica had somehow come together without his stage-management. So he hurried back. Fortunately, he had no need to change his clothes, as he had worn his best suit during the procession of the White Cross.

The festivities were a little formal, at first; but after the Musica had played about five tunes, the padrone insisted that Ettore should bring in the wine, and the atmosphere warmed to a genial hilarity. The Musica drank, and the signori drank, and Ettore drank, and 'Vanna had to be urged to drink; and there were a great many fraternal toasts and complimenti; and then the signori sang to the Musica, for a change—English songs, that were merry, but without passion. And then the Musica played dance tunes, and 'Vanna and Ettore did their celebrated mazurka, in a series of little rushes and twirls round and round the room. He danced well, in spite of his bulk, and

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'Vanna's infinite love covered up with tiny quick steps, that were like a catch in the breath, any mistakes that he might make. The gramophone was turned on, and the Musica danced with the signora, and the padrone danced with 'Vanna.

And once or twice, while she danced, and merrily, but without pertness, made ridiculous jokes, she thought: "How strange and how sad that I should know all the time, while they, the signori, are so innocent and happy . . . " She had no defined notions of what it was that she knew, of which the signori were ignorant. No more than forebodings. . . . And a glance at Ettore quieted these. He could not have stood there, so solid and benevolent, controlling the gramophone, if—if—"I am a monster, indeed, to suppose it," 'Vanna, who was the honest and devoted servant of the signori, chid the instinctive 'Vanna who recognized the nature of her race—perhaps shared it.

One of the lanterns caught fire, and the creeper behind it. 'Vanna cried: "Dio!" and clapped her hands to her head, and was in despair, already seeing La Collina in ashes. But Ettore calmly directed that the table should be brought out again, and that buckets of water should be carried from the big barrel and handed up to him on the table; and, waiting a little until the fire should be of sufficient importance

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for Santa Nucia to see it, he put it out. He imagined Santa Nucia saying: "See how the photographer puts out the fire at La Collina!"

Finally, the signori withdrew to bed: and Ettore presided over a moonlit supper on the terrace, where the air was still a little smoky from the conflagration. They had a white tablecloth, and a bunch of flowers in a jug in the middle of the table, and two or three flasks of red wine, and a monster dish of maccaroni, reddened with tomatoes. 'Vanna, being a woman, was graciously allowed to wait on them, and to hover about the outskirts of the table. At last she perched herself high on the wall a little way behind them. She wore her ear-rings, and the necklace the signori had brought her from Venice, and her gayest blue silk handkerchief twisted round her head, because it was festa. The guests did not take much notice of her, but it was pleasant to know that she was there, if they wanted anything fetched. The cobbler, and the third best carpenter in Santa Nucia, and Marietta's father, and a jovial young sailor from Porto Filippo, and the proprietor of the Café Capri, and the son of the corn-chandler, he who was also captain of the Santa Nucia football team, all feasted royally; maccaroni, and then a raw salad of garlic and sliced roots and cold fish in vinegar, such as they loved best, and much red wine . . . till their heads began to droop towards the white tablecloth.

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And the sailor sang again about passione, till 'Vanna sobbed to hear him, and the cobbler beat time with his head on the table, and Ettore grew more and more dignified; and, creaking and lumbering up the road which swept round the hill, came Dobbiaco and his carriage and horse, to take the Musica home; and he, too, drank with them till the candles were all gutted, and the moon dipped towards the rocking sea. . . .

[XII]

'Vanna heard Dobbiaco whisper to Ettore that he was to slip away, and to come down to Santa Nucia with them, to continue the feast there. With a sudden rush, all her uneasiness swept back, all that she had so nearly forgotten while the party was on. . . . "No, no, no, no!" she cried. "No, Ettore, you are not to go down. No, I do not wish it. You must stay—I must speak with you. It is enough, now!" The men stared at her, half fuddled, half quarrelsome. A woman to interfere! Ettore spoke a few angry words in an undertone, and then went off to get his hat. However drunk, the photographer, representative of a serious profession, must not go down into Santa Nucia, even at one o'clock in the morning, without his hat. 'Vanna followed him, pulling at his arm, scolding, shrilling. . . . She

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could not tell him now, all in a minute, why she was so agitated, and he thought it was but her usual dislike of any hilarious comradeship with Dobbiaco. But she knew that she could not endure to wait until the morning, to unburden what lay so heavily on her heart.

Dobbiaco had followed them round to the outside staircase, which led up to their room at the back of the house. He had not had so much to drink as the others. Ettore shook off 'Vanna's hand from his arm, and went in. She heard a laugh behind her: it seemed to her a mockery. Flinging round in a fury, she just saw Dobbiaco's face, grinning through the gloom.

"Va via!" she cried. "Go! It is always you who makes the mischief. Without you, I should have no anxiety for Ettore."

"Come, come, 'Vanna!" he protested, good-humoured still. "What is the harm? We are all good friends together."

But her tongue was running loose now, and could not be controlled: "You are no good friend to him. I have always suspected you, who soaked the manure before you sold it to the padrone, so that it should weigh more, and you should get paid more. It is not I who would have invited you to-night, remembering that, but you are one of those who come un-

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invited. Si, si, si, si, si, you swindle them, and then you drink their wine, and smile!"

Dobbiaco still laughed, but it was a very ugly laugh, dark and sinister, with his one ragged tooth sticking out over his lip, in a way that made him look like the devil himself.

"So *I* am the swindler! Ebbene—Tell your English padrone to look through Ettore's accounts, and see who has been swindling him every day for a year. Not I!" And he lurched away down to his carriage, muttering.

"You shall not go," sobbed 'Vanna, her head down on her arms, against the rail of the staircase, as Ettore came forth. He was, under all his pomposity, the kindest man in the world. He thought she was ill.

"Patience, 'Vanna. There, be calm. Certainly, I will not go."

At the foot of the path stood Dobbiaco's crazy old carriage, the wheels tied on with bits of string and faith in providence. It was drawn by one patient horse. The Musica—the cobbler, and the carpenter and the corn-chandler's son and the sailor from Porto Filippo—had lurched down the path, and were now leaning tipsily against the horse, calling it a "povera bestia," and trying to pat it. They could just be seen by the uncertain flicker of the red carriage lamp. Presently, the horse moved on a few paces, and the

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Musica fell flat. They picked themselves up, and took up their posts against the horse, and again affectionately tried to pat it. At last, singing, lurching, falling, they moved down the hill and out of sight. . . . Their voices died away. The lamp could be seen now and then between the olives. Then it could be seen no longer.

[XIII]

Ettore was not to be shaken out of his efficiency. He went round the house, a reliable servant, locking doors, extinguishing the lights, putting the dogs to bed. At last, he joined 'Vanna up in their room. "Wait," he said, and dipped his head into a basin of water. His curls were turning grey now. They were glistening wet when, at last, smiling, he came and sat beside her on the bed—his dear smile!

"You should not disturb yourself so, 'Vanna. It is right that men should go sometimes without their wives, and be friendly together. Living at La Collina, you grow too like the English, who take their wives everywhere; but it is not our habit, and you know it. I have arranged, I, for the carpenter to make you a little ironing table, and for the electrician to fix a light in the chimney, above where you cook, so that you shall see better. *I* have arranged it. *I* thought of it."

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'Vanna dived down the front of her dress, and fumbled for the letter which had that day arrived from Turin. Ah, here it was! She hauled it forth, and mutely presented it to him. Ettore read it. She watched his face, in an agony. Then he folded the letter and, taking out the leather pocket-book with the lion of San Marcó stamped upon it, a present brought him by the signori, from Venice, he methodically placed it therein.

"Say, 'Vanna, are you not pleased?"

"Pleased?" she echoed.

"That I have paid off our debts in Turin. Was it a surprise? Now, quite soon perhaps, we can buy the sewing-machine. Ah! there will be no room in your heart for me, when you have the sewing-machine. The good Teresa!" he added complacently. "How she thanks me for my assistance, now, in their time of trouble. It is good to help people; they do not forget it afterwards, if they are grateful."

"This you must tell me, Ettore, or I die, I suffocate. Three thousand lire—where did you get it?"

"I am tired now," said Ettore. "We will talk about that in the morning." He slipped out of his clothes, and went to bed. "Good night, my treasure, buon' riposa."

'Vanna was helpless. There is a point beyond which a good wife may not go, without breaking through the traditions of several hundred, maybe of

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several thousand, years. She was terrified, she was racked, she was in a fever, but she dared ask Ettore no more. Against the rock of his composure, she might beat herself in vain. Supposing, even, she had cried out to him, as she longed to do: "But a night of this I cannot bear! Now, you must speak, now, and save me all this suffering. I have only you." . . . But he had said he was tired, her man, and it was true, he must be tired—all this long day of work; in the early morning, cleaning out the pig-stye; jolting along the hot, dusty road to Andora and back, high entertainment in the evening, and, more than this, the responsibility of La Collina and the welfare of everyone in it; whatever had to be done—"Faccio io!" But those broad shoulders never complained of the burden. No, whatever she went through, he must not be disturbed; he must sleep. Dio, but he had had no dinner! She remembered now—he had come home too late for dinner. Her heart yearned over him, lying there asleep; snoring a little, perhaps; perhaps, indeed, more than a little . . . familiar wistful snores . . . her man. She never could look down on him, lying there, with that peaceful expression, one hand flung above his grey curls, without thinking of those nights, during the War, when he had lain in the snow, those nights in Servia—tired and wounded and untended, lying in the

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snow. . . . Ah, Madre mia! But was it possible that such things could happen, and could happen, moreover, to Ettore, without anyone caring? Even the good God, it was to be supposed, was busy elsewhere at the time. . . . 'Vanna sighed, kissed her husband—but he did not stir—and joined him under the tent of bright yellow mosquito-netting. Then she yielded herself almost voluptuously to a night of insomnia and poignant martyrdom. "Buon' riposa," he had said; "sleep well!" Madonna mia! She endured wakefulness for, perhaps, twenty minutes. It seemed like eternity. Then came a sudden rush of anger, drowning tenderness. Why should he sleep and sleep, why need he snore, monotonous contented music, while she, innocent of wrong-doing—?— No, it was not to be borne. When a thing was not to be borne, one could say so, yes, surely. 'Vanna was not of those unfortunates who remain tied in their tongues or in their actions: the divine gift of utterance was hers, her lips helped by her hands, her body, the brilliant flash of her eyes, deep-set and slanting. Exaggeration was not denied her; if she were ill: "I die," quoth 'Vanna at once, with the utmost conviction . . . and her suffering lids drooped; she abandoned herself to death. Until, well again, she could chatter, laughing, rosy-cheeked: "Yesterday, indeed, I suffered a

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little, Signora. But what would you? To all of us are given these pains. They pass. We must be patient . . ."

But now—ah, she felt ill, so ill; her nerves throbbing, her body a hot, sore misery . . . Suffocation . . . "I die!"—She woke Ettore—shook him, shook him awake, shook him till he sat up, rumpled and heavy-eyed, muttering something indistinguishable. . . .

"See, Ettore, I can bear it no longer! You must tell me now. How did you get those three thousand lire, which you sent to our Teresa? Dobbiaco says that you are a rogue, that you swindled our signori. I told him to put his evil tongue back in his mouth, but he will talk and talk. He is wicked, that Dobbiaco! You must not let him say these things, as though you had not been an honest man all your life, and careful of our signori's interests: exchanging the bad olives from our garden here, for six gallons of oil from the shop at the level crossing, so that they might mix them with their good olives and have more to sell. But would not Dobbiaco, in your place, have done this, and still charged the signori for the oil, keeping the soldi in his own pocket? Si, si . . . for what signori would have enquired what became of bad olives? Dobbiaco, surely, would have taken his luck . . ." Terror was in her heart. She rushed on again, not stopping to let him speak, for fear of what

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he might say: "Three thousand lire! It is a large sum. We thought that it would take us a great many years, living here quietly, and spending no money, before we could save it, and send it back to Teresa, a little at a time. But now, all at once! You wonder that I was surprised? 'If he had won a prize in the lottery,' I said to myself, 'he would surely have told me.' But what I dread most to hear, Ettore, caro mio, is that you have had to borrow the whole sum, to help Teresa and Mario in their trouble, from someone here, in Santa Nucia, someone who will not be easy in his dealings—"

But that was not what she most dreaded to hear. It was no good, she could not go on being voluble for ever, chattering indignantly of what Dobbiaco might have done in Ettore's place. No, Ettore was going to speak. What he said would end suspense. Well, if he had been stealing, if they had to leave La Collina, if they had to starve and go to prison, for all the world to know—then let it be. 'Vanna, suddenly a fatalist, flopped to the very bottom of the comfortless well, and lay there, supine. . . .

"Dobbiaco talks too much," pronounced Ettore, composedly. "At heart he is good, but he talks too much. And, moreover, he charged the signori twenty lire, when he drove them to Porto Filippo and back, only I saw to it, I, that he should only get fifteen. Had it not been for me, the signori would have had to

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pay twenty-five lire, for Dobbiaco would have charged them more than twenty, had he not known that I protect their interests. So that I saved them seven lire."

'Vanna gazed up at him, bewildered.

"Do you not understand, 'Vanna? If the sum stands at eighteen lire in their books, after I had beaten Dobbiaco down from twenty to fifteen—and he would have charged them twenty-five—have I not saved them seven lire?"

"*If the sum stands at eighteen lire in their books—*" 'Vanna was no fool. Ettore had clearly shown her now, in one concrete example, what had been happening every hour and every month, from the day the signori had moved into La Collina, until to-day, the anniversary. Seven lire, he had said he had saved them on the transaction. Fifteen lire had been the charge of Dobbiaco's ultimate requisition. So three lire Ettore had pocketed; and so on, down all the items, down those painfully written accounts:

> "Carriage from Alassio, half a sheep from the pastore, drawing-pins and onions . . . so many lire."

. . . She could see him now, sitting at the kitchen table with his bottle of ink and his blotting-paper and

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pen, while the scrawl filled up page after page. For the signori were extravagant; they had said: "Get us this, Ettore," and "Pay for that, Ettore," "Arrange for this and that, Ettore." And it all had to go down in the book.

"Three thousand lire," whispered 'Vanna, at last. She was awed at the magnitude of the robbery. . . .

Then the spell shifted and broke. She became herself again. "But it is dishonest!" she screamed shrilly. "Dio, it is dishonest!" they had always been so stern in condemnation of dishonesty, she and Ettore. "It is dishonest," she repeated again and again, and flung up her arms to heaven.

For one moment, Ettore became in reality the great man she had always imagined him: "It is business," he said, simply.

'Vanna wept, rocking herself to and fro, moaning and crying out to the Saints and to the Madonna—not to the good God, no, for He would not be pitiful; He would chastise. And at memory of the good God, 'Vanna's conventional code, honesty and dishonesty, lies and truth, black and white, heaven and hell, a code which had received its check at the words: "It is business," pronounced in the man-voice of all the men in the world to all the wives, that code asserted itself again.

"We shall have to confess to the signori," sobbed

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'Vanna. "First to the priest, and then to the signori. It is all over now, for us; we go from La Collina. We cannot live on here, cheating them."

"But you knew it all the time," said Ettore.

[XIV]

. . . *Had* she known it all the time? Ettore spoke with the matter-of-course inflexion of one who states a fact. But surely she could not have known it, or she would have protested before? All this agony at discovery, was it not a proof that she had suspected nothing, nothing whatever? . . . 'Vanna became flamboyant in her denials, and her accusations. Magnificent, she piled on the attack; her rectitude, virtue and honesty grew to super heights. Not another crumb of the signori's bread would she eat! not another sip of wine, paid for by them in their innocence! No, rather would she die of thirst, and die of the want of food! Rather would she go barefoot, and beg! She had known nothing, nothing, nothing. She had believed Ettore to be different from all other men, and better than all other men, in his dealings. The signori had trusted him, had trusted them both. The signori were foreigners and helpless, and had been betrayed. Now that 'Vanna knew, they would be betrayed no longer. Confession—and then restitution! Like two flags stiffened

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by a fierce wind, these were flapped in front of Ettore's still drowsy eyes. Confession and restitution! To-night the signori must be told all—well, to-morrow, then, as soon as they were up; and every penny must be paid back to them, the whole three thousand lire, if 'Vanna should have to work it out of her very flesh. Right was right, and wrong was wrong—

For, in a sort of way, she *had* known all the time. . . .

Deep down at the bottom of her heart was an instinct that would not be denied—business instinct—wonderful opportunities . . . one took opportunities. It went deeper than religion, and deeper than the simple conventional code, and deeper even than love. She had known nothing, of course . . . nothing definite. . . . A wistful optimist, a creative optimist even, she had wished into being an Ettore who was the soul of integrity, scornful of other and baser Italians—and this Ettore she had praised to the signori; with glorious conviction, she had praised him. For whether he existed or not, he had to exist and be acknowledged in her only possible world of faithful servants, kind employers, rectitude rewarded, virtuous wives, loving mothers, lies and truth, black and white, heaven and hell. . . . Her world of set pieces, without complications or fine shades. Her world, that had been given to her as a child—

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—But after, and not before, her instincts had been given her.

But now it had become crystallized into words, into three thousand lire, into Teresa's letter of thanks, into Dobbiaco's voice, saying: "Tell your English padrone to look through Ettore's accounts, and see who has been swindling them, every day for a year!" . . . finally, into Ettore's: "But you knew, 'Vanna!" —So now, with all the strength of her conventional being, she had to protest, and she could not protest quietly, but must storm, and gesticulate, and flaunt her integrity, and spare no pity for Ettore; accepting neither half-measures, nor half-atonements. Wilfully she created all this turmoil and sound and reverberation, because if she sat still and listened to memory, she might have to believe that perhaps, indeed, she had known something, a little, of what Ettore had been doing, all that year. . . .

Those bad olives!

"You will not tell the signori, 'Vanna. I will not allow it. It would be absurd!"

"I must," she repeated stubbornly. "There is no other way."

All 'Vanna's gallantry in this. She was risking—Ettore. And at the aridity of life without Ettore, she dared not even glance.

"But listen," he argued. "Supposing I had not been saving this sum to pay our honourable debts;

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and supposing Teresa, who is of your flesh and blood, and dear to you, had written to me in a hurry, as she did, saying that her husband was in trouble, and she was ill, and her little ones without food, and yet another bambino on the way; and supposing, 'Vanna, I had had no money at all to send her, would you have been happy then? That would have been a fine gratitude, would it not, to have written back: 'I am sorry—niente soldi, no money,' for all their kindness in the past, when we were ruined ourselves? Why, then, do you consider the signori before your sister's child, who loves you, and whom you love, and she said her first prayers in your arms?"

This was true. 'Vanna nodded, and listened to him while he went on: "Though remember this, 'Vanna. It is not that I have not the greatest affection and liking and admiration for the signori—have I not protected them, have I not stood between them and all those who would otherwise have robbed the skins off their bodies, and did I take their money without working for it, I?"

Again 'Vanna nodded. Ettore was right. He had worked harder, perhaps, than anyone else in that house. He was not one of those who lie in the sun and wait for good fortune to drop on them. The signori had much, much, to thank him for. True, they had offered him wages once or twice, seeing how industrious he was in their service, but if it gave Et-

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tore—who, you must remember, was of noble birth—pleasure to wave away all question of money and wages, to behave nobly, and then, after his gesture, quietly to adjust matters with himself, was there any harm in that? It amounted to the same thing as clamouring greedily for pay, but it was better manners.

Ettore was not consciously arguing as a diplomat. He was plausible, but not trying to be plausible; he was tranquilly sure of being right; and this gave him far more strength in combating 'Vanna's scruples, than any wiliness could have done. Yet she still fought sturdily enough on the side of tradition and the signori:

"Never again shall I be able to laugh with them as before, to sit with them when they play the gramophone, and sing, and joke with the padrone for having two eggs instead of one, when I say it is because he is a bambino, a baby, and he says it is because he is a cavaliere, and a great man. Always, now, shall I be thinking: 'See a little, 'Vanna, if they knew, they would not want to joke with us, they would frown, they would wish us out of the house,'—they, who are now so pleased to see us when they come home from journeys, so sure that we are doing the very best we can for them."

"That is all very well," objected Ettore. "Nevertheless, when it comes to what matters in life, the

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signori will hold together, and we others must hold together too. They do the best they can for themselves, and we must do the same. It is Nature. Supposing now, for instance, la signora inherited a large house in England, with English servants in it already, and they wanted to go home to their own land, what would they do? Would they say: 'We cannot, because of 'Vanna and Ettore?' No, they would joyously pack up, and sell La Collina, and they would say: 'How sad to leave this good 'Vanna, this good Ettore. We have liked them so much. We will make them a present. Yes, indeed, but a fine present'—and then good-bye! And sometimes, certainly, a postcard from them, in England; and then no more postcards. . . . I am grateful to the English signori, 'Vanna, I have told you before, and I have great respect for them. They are educated and considerate—but we must take the opportunities we can for ourselves, we others, or we die!"

"You are right," said 'Vanna.

"Then you will not tell them?" He was a little anxious, for all his composure. Women, even Italian wives—yes, even 'Vanna—were unexpected, foolish, sometimes, foolish in a way sorely trying to a good business man.

The two 'Vannas—one, the crustacean, made up of habit and tradition and an articulate creed: "You must," and "You must not"; and the other 'Vanna

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of human fire, human realizations, with perhaps even a wicked little chuckle among them—had a brief last struggle. The result was a deadlock:

"I will not tell them—no!" said 'Vanna. "Yet something must be done."

"Done! What can be done? We have paid our debt. That is a good thing. No more need be done."

"We have not paid our debts! Our debts in Turin, yes, to Teresa and Mario, but even that money has not fallen from the skies. We owe it to the signori."

"And who says," quoth Ettore grandiloquently, not in the least meaning it, but making his first bad mistake of the evening, "who says that I will not pay it back to them, I?"

"It is impossible."

" 'Vanna," said Ettore. "Nothing is impossible. Good-night, 'Vanna. Good-night, carissima." He kissed her, and turned over on his side, and signified by every line of his stout body that he was plunging into profound slumber, and did not wish to be disturbed again for trifles.

'Vanna lay awake for yet an hour. Her mental state was not one that should have been left to itself. While Ettore spoke, all was well; but after Ettore was silent, her thoughts became inflamed and agitated, and swelled to grotesque proportions. . . . She remembered old happy times together with the

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signori at La Collina, as a story that was told, and could happen no more: Christmas, when they had all held council about the sort of bird that the signori wanted for their Christmas dinner; and they had spoken the English names; and she and Ettore, the Italian names; and there had been much pantomime, animal noises, quacking and waddlings, Ettore trying to explain by walking as though he had webbed feet. . . . Dio! But that had been funny! The padrone drawing little pictures of absurd creatures, with long, long necks, and with big beaks. Mà! how she had laughed. . . . It had been a goose they had meant, of course, but nearly, very nearly misled by the padrone's drawings, nearly they had ordered a swan! The goose had been sent for, all the way from Turin; Ettore had ordered that. A beautiful goose! They called the signori into the kitchen to see it, and they had been surprised that it was alive and walking about . . . the Signora had tried to pat its head, but it had backed into the sink. "Now you will wish to see it killed," Ettore had said, drawing his chopper. . . . But the signori fled. . . .

And Ettore had sent for a little fir-tree, which la Signora had so desired, because she was homesick; for two days it had been locked up in the verandah room; it should be a surprise for the signori! The signori had wanted to decorate the tree themselves, but, of course, that could not be allowed. It was not

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right that they should have all that trouble—nor all that amusement. When it was ready, all covered with snow and hung with silver—Heavens, what loveliness!—Then, on Christmas Eve, 'Vanna and Ettore had thrown open the doors, and the signori and their friends had trooped in. The tree was lit up in the dark room on the dark verandah, and she, 'Vanna, had stood beside it, waving a fire-work in a shower of golden sparks, round and round her head, dancing, and crying excitedly: "Evviva i signori! Evviva La Collina!" and the gramophone was playing "Funiculi, Funicula"—the record, once again, specially ordered by Ettore.

Suddenly, with a pang, 'Vanna wondered how much—more—he had charged them for the goose, for the tree, for the shining decorations on the tree, and for the gramophone record, which had given them all such pleasure? . . .

Oh, it was wrong, wrong! No use to persuade herself any more. Now that consequences had thrust their noses above the ground, like the first green shoots from buried bulbs, she could see clearly it was wrong. Now, when anyone said the word "thief," she would shrink, instead of pouring herself out in ardent indignation; now, when the signori gave her a present, a brooch or a shawl, or a dress that was veritably English and therefore doubly precious, now she would not be able to thank them with that rush of

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happy words, the radiant gratitude, the compliments appropriate to the occasion, which had all been so easy to her before; now, when she went to Mass or heard church-bells, she would weep. . . . Oh, now, now it was all spoilt! All the bloom and gaiety brushed off, unless—

Unless, after all, they could pay it back.

Ettore could do everything—Ettore, who had taken three thousand lire without the signore even noticing that aught was amiss—Ettore could surely also return the three thousand lire, a little at a time, a little at a time—

[xv]

She woke him, and told him so.

"It cannot be done," said Ettore, rather bored.

'Vanna flared up. "I am an honest woman. I cannot live with this in my heart, here, under the roof of the signori. It will tear me, I shall suffer, my feet will be heavy as I go about my work. You lied, Ettore, when you said that I knew what you were doing . . . I knew nothing! Had I known, not another minute would I have stopped at La Collina! Where then, is my hope of Heaven, if I rob my employers? It is I who have to speak now, and say what is to be done, and not you; and I say that, before the next anniversary comes round of the day

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when we all moved in, yes, before the cypress trees that we planted to-day have, by the goodness of God and the sunshine that He sends us, grown higher, grown taller by a year, this money must be paid back! It is right, I am an honest woman. My mother taught me to be honest."

Her tongue raced passionately from sentiment to picturesque imagery, from proverbial righteousness to anger, to drama, and then swiftly reacted again to trustfulness:

"You will do it!" she cried, flinging down her ultimatum. . . . And then again, pleading with him: "You will do it?"

"But see, 'Vanna. If suddenly I came to them in a year's time, with three thousand lire that I had saved—it is a large sum—could I say to the padrone 'Here, take it! Last year I robbed you of it, now I return it to you.' He would send for the carabinieri; I should go to prison. Is that what you want, 'Vanna?"

"No," she wept. "No!" her arms fiercely about him, now. "But I thought—Madonna mia, forgive me if it is wrong!—I thought if, whenever you make up the books, you took away so much and so much from the sum they owe you for expenses, a little at a time, pretending to them that things were cheaper, they would not know, they would not notice, they are careless, the signori! It could be managed—not

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by Dobbiaco, no! not by me, who have a thick head, but by you, Ettore . . . perhaps . . ."

And on Ettore dawned the possibility of great achievement.

If he had had to be resourceful in the invention of outlay that did not exist, during his first year's stewardship, how much more resourceful would he have to be in his opposite invention of bargains that he had not really made, in his second year's stewardship. He already heard himself saying to the padrone: "You will see, signore, that there has been a saving of nearly a hundred lire on the wood. I arranged it, I, with a certain man who lives up in the mountains. I remembered that he had this load to dispose of, cheaper than any you would get all along this coast as far as Genoa; and as for the portion of lamb we had on the night your visitors came to dinner, and that barrel of wine from Piedmonte—I did not have to pay for either, for I had heard that the potato crop was rotten this year in Piedmonte, and so I was wise beforehand; I grew, in our garden, many more potatoes than we wanted, and I made a good exchange, I, our potatoes for their wine, and there are still enough potatoes left to give the pastore in return for half a lamb" . . . and the signori would approve his sagacity and forethought . . . and yet, all the while, he would have paid for the wine, and paid for the half-sheep, out of his own earnings

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as a photographer. And so, little by little—yes, he could do it; by dint of writing down, say, that he had spent only eight lire whenever he had spent ten, and making up the extra two out of his own pocket, his own earnings, he could pay back the three thousand lire without the signori ever knowing, and 'Vanna should be at rest. And, moreover, he would have gained a reputation for himself, and many moments of applause, sweet and intoxicating moments. . . .

By this time next year—it heightened the drama of his achievement to have a date, an anniversary, to work up to—he would have done it. No other man but Ettore! It would be stupendous, it would call into play all the astuteness that his brain possessed, all the energy. But he never resented working for his effects. He could do it. And it may be, after all, that 'Vanna was right! One must be honest. Anyhow, the year would be less dull now, than if he had tamely gone back to presenting the accounts just as they stood, neither inflated nor dwindled.

"Povera 'Vanna," said Ettore. "You have been upset. Patience! Leave it to me." . . . He patted her shoulder, then suddenly sat upright. The window of their room was at an angle to the first-floor landing: " 'Vanna, I believe the padrone has again forgotten to turn off the light outside his bedroom!"—He began to climb out of bed.

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"But, Ettore, you are so tired! Can it not be left—"

"It is a waste of electricity; it cannot be permitted."

'Vanna watched him go. How conscientious he was, how trustworthy, her Ettore!

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PART II
THE SIGNORI

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[1]

THEO MORGAN thought how pleasant it was, when she woke up, to see 'Vanna's wide smile and twinkling, affectionate eyes, appearing over the ledge of her bed. She and Johnny had had their beds built one above the other, after the style of ships' bunks, to save space; so 'Vanna had to bring her morning tea up the ladder. Now and then, 'Vanna's face announced catastrophe; worse even, cataclysm; such as the death of a baby rabbit, the theft of three strawberries, or the breaking of the last cup of their breakfast set. Again, at other times: "I die" was written clearly in the woebegone brows and drooping, puckered mouth. There were no intermediate stages between 'Vanna radiant and 'Vanna dying. This morning she was radiant.

"How was the theatre, 'Vanna?"

"Ah, signora, but it was a marvel! I cried and cried. Such an evening of pleasure! And Ettore, he, too, cried—not so much, for his temper is more phlegmatic. That is what I enjoy, when I go to the theatre. No one wishes to sit and not cry, and not laugh, and feel nothing, and come home again, the

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same as they went. Is it not true? When I pay my soldi, I like to feel more fear, more pain, than I can ever have sitting at home in my kitchen with nothing to pay."

"What was the piece about, 'Vanna?"

Johnny sat up in the bunk below Theo's, and prepared to enjoy himself. They had had many early performances from 'Vanna, while il Capitano's morning tea got cold, and the signorina Elizabeta waited for her hot water. Once there had been a spirited rendering of how she, 'Vanna, would have sent Marietta's too violent lover spinning to the right-about, had she been in Marietta's place. Once it was a farmhouse imitation of parent pigeons, teaching their young to fly; often it would be a hymn to fecundity, a sudden ecstatic outburst in praise of flowers that opened in Collina soil, and tiny animals that stirred for the first time in Collina straw: "Everything blooms! everything grows and is nourished! Ah, che bella! che merveglia!" And once 'Vanna performed, with as much emotion as though she were actually going through the experience again, how a week before, Ettore had infuriated her by going down to the city in the evening, wearing his best shirt, his clean shirt, the shirt 'Vanna had stitched for him: " 'Here do I make myself weary, washing and ironing and sewing on buttons, and yet you cannot do me this favour and change your so clean shirt,

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when you are likely to spill the drink down the front of it!' But he smiled, and he said: 'I do not spill the drink, I! I can drink without spilling it.' And I scolded him, così, and shook my fist at him, and said: 'You will not go from this house till you have changed your shirt.' But he did not change, and when I ran to lock the door, he went through the other. . . . A pity that there are two doors in the kitchen! And I was so angry, so angry, signori, my head was hot, my mouth was full of words. I did not know what to do with my anger, so . . ." She sank her voice to a whisper; and looked at Johnny and Theo with eyes aslant, roguish, a little ashamed . . . "So that night, signora, I slept in the verandah-room, on the sofa. You did not know it. Ettore, when he came home, looked for me. I had locked the door. It was terrible! He said at the door to me: ' 'Vanna,' and shook it; and I held on to the sofa so that I should not open it, and I prayed a little to the Saints to make me strong, for when one is angry, and one is right to be angry, it is foolish to give in before the lesson is taught. It was wrong of him not to change his shirt, it was lazy, it was obstinate, it was unkind."

" 'Vanna's king," said Theo, afterwards, in comment to Johnny, "is by no means a king who can do no wrong! I'm sorry that all this drama was going on in the house, and we knew nothing about it."

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Johnny had replied that probably quite a lot went on, that they knew nothing about.

But meanwhile, this special morning, about four or five days before the second anniversary of their move into La Collina, 'Vanna was strutting and gesticulating, re-living for them the drama that, for a great treat, she had seen played by a strolling company at the Santa Nucia theatre, the night before. She was a marvellous actress. Theo leant luxuriously over the edge of her bunk, as though it were the ledge of a box in Drury Lane.

—"And I thought I should have died with fright, signori, when that terrible ghost appeared, all in white, in the dark, and said: 'Son' il spettro del' suo padre!' . . . and he, the poor one, could not marry the girl whom he loved, and she was so pretty, and so faithful, as a young girl should be; as Marietta should be . . . but she is young, and her head gyrates too easily. Ah, Dio! when she came in with flowers, and sang, and then they carried her to her sweetheart, the prince, così, she was dead, drowned. Mà, but he should not have treated her like that! But one must have pity for him, for he had so much to do, and he was certainly mad himself, after he had seen the spectre. And they killed, and they killed each other, signori; and his father's wife, she, too, was unfaithful. She had married his uncle, who had murdered his brother and made himself

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king. That any woman should so far forget herself, and forget the dead! But I cried all the same, when she drank the poison, la povera! . . . one must not be too hard. The young prince fought with his sweetheart's brother, and they both died; but before he died—" 'Vanna's eyes flashed and she raised her arm:—"Like this, he killed that perfidious one, his uncle, and there they all lay dead, everyone dead, signori, like this, and this, and this, all over the stage. . . . Only I had forgotten, indeed, that it was a stage. It was beautifully played," sobbed 'Vanna. —"I come, I come quickly!" as il Capitano was heard bawling impatiently for his tea.

" 'Vanna, wait a minute," as she was disappearing. "Was the name of that beautiful play 'Hamlet'?"

"Si, si—Amletto. I have never enjoyed a drama so much. Not even 'The Perfidious Count of Venice,' which I saw at Toreno. All the time I sat holding tight on to Ettore's arm. I could hardly breathe; my throat was thick. It was the most exciting play in the world!"

And thus paying to "Hamlet," on behalf of "we others" what was, perhaps, its first genuine tribute as a "thriller," 'Vanna really did hurry away. She came back with the hot water a few minutes later, and hung about for a minute in that unhappy way, which Theo knew was invariable prelude to a request which Ettore himself was too noble to make.

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"Scusi, signori, but here is the book, and Ettore says, if it does not disturb you too much, could you tell him, perhaps, the date when it would be convenient to pay some of it, as he has to adjust himself with the tradesmen."

"All right! Tell Ettore that I will settle up on—let me see, what is to-day—Tuesday? I will settle up on Saturday."

"The signore has forgotten what day Saturday is," said 'Vanna. "We shall have been two years at La Collina. It will be an Occasion."

"Lord, yes! So it is. How do you remember?"

"To-day is also an Occasion. Ever since early this morning, the children have been coming up the hill with bouquets for Ettore. It is his Saint's Day. There will be a cake. The signora shall see when she comes downstairs."

[II]

"I say, Theo," Johnny burst out, directly they were alone again. "I honestly can *not* make out what Ettore has been doing with the books lately. We can't be spending as little as this, considering how much we spent last year."

"Don't forget," said Theo, calmly, "that he was swindling us all last year."

"Yes, I know. Of course he was. *That* didn't

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bother me in the slightest. It's his *not* swindling us, that's bothering me. He's got something ominous up his sleeve, I should think. Do you suppose that 'Vanna knew that he used to cheat us?"

"No, of course not, bless her! She's the most honest person in the world. Mind you, I don't think Ettore was dishonest, either. He just had to make his living out of us, somehow. What is the use of having a family of nice guileless English delivered into your hands, unless you do something about it? Anyhow, and even with all his little adjustments and commissions and private percentages, he did things for about half the price that we would have spent in England."

"Oh yes, we profited by being acquiescent, and saying: 'Good Ettore! Thrifty Ettore!' at intervals. He's quite insatiable for applause, isn't he? I think it's growing on him lately."

"Let's see the book, Johnny."

Theo looked rapidly down the items. Yes, it was quite true, the cheapness of everything, which had formerly been just pleasingly believable, was now something to make any reasonably intelligent signora distinctly uneasy. What had Ettore in store for them? . . .

She brought up the question again at breakfast, to see if Captain Edward Locke, who, since he had retired, with a game leg, from the Senior Service, was

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more or less a permanent guest at La Collina, could throw any light on their bewilderment.

"I don't mind being the victim," explained Johnny, "I know that we English are chubby little cherubs in a strange land, and that we must expect to be fleeced."

—"I say," cried Elizabeth, his very pretty young cousin, coming into the dining-room from the kitchen, "have you seen the cake? It's got 'Sant' Ettore' on it in pink sugar, and there's a sort of altar in the kitchen!"

Theo, on pretext of speaking to 'Vanna about the quality of the peach jam, went in to have a look. The kitchen table was piled high with vases of stiff nosegays. The cake, taking precedence of mere vegetation, occupied the central place. Ettore, in his best suit, stood beside the table, receiving with dignity a fresh supply of floral offerings which at that moment the three little brown-eyed sisters of Marietta were laying at his feet. 'Vanna, in her favourite position, hands on her broad hips, short legs a little apart, smiled proudly at the shrine of Ettore; and told Theo that the signora must cut the cake that day at tea—la signora, and no other, because she was the signora.

"Sometimes," said Theo, returning to the breakfast-table, with a report of what was going on, "I feel that I cannot quite live up to the signora business.

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'La signora' has to be queenly and gracious, with just a touch of severity, and a good deal of condescension. She is a great improvement on 'the missus'—but sometimes I wish that 'Vanna wouldn't see us moving about as stock characters in a too-good-to-be-true atmosphere."

Elizabeth said: "They are more like feudal retainers than anything I have ever struck in England. The art of 'feudalling' is not so easy as it looks. 'Vanna does it perfectly. I noticed it especially the other day, when you and Johnny went into San Remo to stay the night with the Jamiesons. First, a great wail of lamentation that you should leave your home: 'Are you not happy at La Collina?' Then, once they had got over that, they comforted themselves by making a ceremony of it: 'On the part of Ettore and myself, I first wish the signori a good journey, much amusement, and a safe return to La Collina. The signori will give our distinct complimenti to the Signora Jamieson—'"

"Molly Jamieson is 'Vanna's great favourite," Theo interrupted. "She says: 'Even when in a negligent toilet, how lovely is the Signora Jamieson! Oh, the rose and pearl of her shoulders!' But then all my friends are as 'Vanna's own. She likes them because they are fine, because they are delicate, because they are considerate, and especially when they are serious. 'Seriousness' is apparently the

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virtue of virtues, and exclusively to be found among the English. She disapproved of Joyce Waring, though; you were here already, weren't you, Ted, when Joyce was staying with us?—'Vanna did not like Joyce because she was not serious:—'She came down one night in her dressing-gown after the Signora had gone decently to bed, and ate the Gorgonzola cheese and drank several aperitifs with the Signore, and said to me, laughing, her finger on her lips: "'Vanna, you will not tell la Signora, will you?" but that was not a thing that one does—'"

"Hello!" Johnny exclaimed, "I never knew *you* knew about that!"

They all laughed.

"No, dear heart?" Theo's eyelashes rested in a demure fan on her cheeks. "Elizabeth has missed out the gem of our farewells. The other day, when 'Vanna had quite finished with assurances of her vigilance and Ettore's, during our absence, her hopes for our safe return, and that we would benefit by the change, her sorrow at the prospect of the house bereft of the signore and la signora, there was still something on her mind. It turned out that we had forgotten, till too late, to tell her that we would not be home that night, and she had already prepared the ravioli. 'Will you be in family with the Signora Jamieson at San Remo for dinner?' she asked. . . . The idea proved to be that we should take in the

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ravioli in a paper bag. I had to be rather tactful about it: 'Imagine the feelings of the cook of the Signora Jamieson,' I said, 'if we brought in our own ravioli. Would she not take it as a sign that we thought our cook more excellent than hers?' And 'Vanna, whose manners are perfect, saw it at once: 'You are quite right, signora. It is I who am rustica. When one is not educated, one sometimes hurts the feelings of others, as you and the signore and il Capitano and the Signorina Elizabeta would never do.' "

"I'll tell you something about 'Vanna," said Captain Locke, with that funny crooked smile on his sunburnt face which, combined with the genial beakiness of his nose, made him look like a good-tempered parrot. "She's a genius. She's got the gift of service. She never loses her poise; nor tumbles into familiarity on the one hand, nor resentment on the other. I tell you, you can take the same joy in seeing something like that perfectly done, as in the build of a ship, or a sunset, or a pack of hounds in full cry. . . . Just the thing that you couldn't imagine being done better. Sometimes, when you young rakes are all out on the tiles, and I'm alone, she and Ettore will just drop in, and sit with me, and keep me entertained. Ettore falls asleep in the middle, often; thundering snore he's got!"

"Has he?" cried Theo, gladly. "We thought he

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had, by the look of him. That's why we had a specially apart apartment built on for them, with their own private staircase. It *is* a relief that all those precautions weren't wasted."

"Well," the old sailor went on, pursuing his subject. "'Vanna never lets me feel that she's sitting there for *my* pleasure, always for hers. Then, if you're in trouble, she can condole with you and kiss you, or share in your good news, come and join you when you've got friends, and the gramophone is playing; or she can even criticize your friends passionately—I've heard her do it. The point is, she never loses her poise; she never presumes, as they say in Peckham Rye; never gets pert, or flounces, or talks about her rights."

"She doesn't think she's got any," Theo said. "There's no 'day out' and 'second Sunday off' in Italy—not with 'Vanna, anyway. I suppose service *is* a gift, if done exquisitely, as 'Vanna does it. It's a matter of balance, of maintaining her equilibrium."

"'Tisn't!" retorted the Captain. "You're too damned clever, Theo. It's a matter of heart, or of kindness, if you like it better. That's where 'Vanna gets what you call 'equilibrium,' or some such modern stuff and nonsense. She's a confounded bully, too. Stood over me last night, when I wouldn't drink my slops nor go to bed at the hour she thought good for me, and drove me upstairs as though I had been a

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chicken and she a hen, scolding at the top of her voice. Got any tobacco on you, Johnny?"

They were still talking about 'Vanna as they sat smoking, after breakfast, on the low garden wall. The subject held them enthralled; it may have been because she was, as Captain Locke had said, a genius; and sophisticated people must puzzle about the causes of genius, its shining difference from the ordinary, instead of thankfully accepting it, as one accepts the miracle of dew on the grass, and smell of sea in the wind.

"They rather frighteningly rely on Johnny and me for fifty years or so of happy home life at La Collina. Modern restlessness is outside their experience. In fact, 'Vanna and Ettore are themselves even older than old-fashioned. Modern servants clamour for independence. But 'Vanna and Ettore have voluntarily put themselves into the position of contented slavery. The unconscious process of thought is, I suppose, that slavery is a fair return for material security."

"Slavery," exclaimed Johnny, scornfully. "Who said slaves were unhappy?"

No one had said it. No one would, while Johnny was about. This was his favourite theme—that the mass of people were happier under a benevolent autocrat, a thoroughly efficient tyrant, than starved and scattered and in revolt, one against the other, nomi-

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nally free men. Johnny always started by talking sense; then his reason would become heated by a rush of blood; his first statement of exaggerated value would draw a protest from his hearers, or an incredulous smile and shrug of the shoulders. . . . That was enough for Johnny!—off he went, maddened, into realms of sheer, wild nonsense, intoxicating himself with great draughts of his own volubility. Nobody could stop Johnny in this defiant, worked-up condition. . . . Gradually, he would evaporate; gradually, his lunacy died down; finally, with a sunny smile: "Well, that's what I think, you know. I suppose nobody agrees with me? Perhaps I am wrong." And sirocco was over for the day. But it was not fair, as Theo pointed out, that now he should be able to start himself off, when they were all so careful not to encourage him, by the question:

"Who said slavery?"

"We didn't, Johnny, we didn't! Look at the pretty thistles—look at that fishing-smack!"

Johnny lay on his back on the grass, and refused both thistles and fishing-smack.

"Now these two, for instance, Ettore and 'Vanna, to all practical purposes, are slaves; to all practical purposes, Theo and I are autocrats and tyrants; we have their lives in our hands. They yielded themselves by choice, it's true, but they surrendered because they knew they would be better as our slaves,

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with well-filled bellies, with a soft bed to sleep on, and their future safe, than they would have been, precariously working on their own, never knowing where next day's food was to come from, or how long they would be able to afford shelter. What you call freedom," glaring at Captain Locke, "is the most abject slavery; it's slavery to fear."

"But," argued Captain Locke, "actually, they're not your property. They can give notice whenever they like."

But here Theo, for once, stood on Johnny's side: "It would never occur to them. They've yielded up that, with the rest. This is their home; they have planted themselves, easily, yet deeply. When they talk about the future, it's always: *'We,'* meaning 'la famiglia,' meaning Johnny and me, 'Vanna and Ettore; not Marietta so much, because she'll marry. They say 'If *we* can afford'—another rabbit-hutch, for instance. It's frightening, this confidence. We didn't ask for it—it happened like that. We thought that we were getting servants, as we understood service in England. Service comes out of their blessed souls, here. Oh, they have an awfully good time; you needn't look pitying, Ted. When they are ill, they can go to bed; and when their fathers die, they can go and visit them; and when 'Vanna insists on carrying Johnny's suitcase up the hill, because he is the signore and she is only a povera donna di servizio

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—well then, he insists that he shall carry the suit-case for himself, and her parcel into the bargain, because he is an Englishman and she is an Italian lady."

"Shut up!" said Elizabeth. "Here is 'Vanna."

"Signori," cried 'Vanna, joyful and mysterious. "Ettore wishes to know if the signori care to see him in his new clothes, before he takes them off. He has just been down to Santa Nucia." And she beckoned towards the doorway of the house.

Ettore emerged, resplendent. He stood quite still, smiling a little, the ends of his grizzled moustache slightly twirled, while his good wife showed him off, first as a complete spectacle, and then in single portions. And Johnny and Theo, Elizabeth and Captain Locke, sang choruses of admiration. There was little to choose in glory between what lay above his watch-chain, and what lay below. The watch-chain itself was new, 'Vanna's own gift to him out of what she had saved from her wages. . . . For she had not thought it necessary, even in strict parley with her conscience, to give up her wages towards payment of Ettore's debt to La Collina.

"What's the time, Ettore?" the captain called out, to please him.

Still smiling, Ettore brought forth two watches, one from each pocket, one at either end of the watch-chain. "Always two," he boasted. "Always I

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carry two, I. Then, if one breaks, I have the other." And he balanced himself equally again, by returning the watches to their separate pockets. "And now," he said, with a gesture signifying to 'Vanna that he was about to talk business, and that she could be dismissed, "first, the post." And he distributed it. "After the post, the signore's shoes,"—they appeared in his hands from nowhere, like a conjuring trick—"back from being repaired. I saw, I, that one of the seams was almost burst across the toe, so I took them, that the harm should go no further." He gave them to Johnny. Johnny bowed. Ettore bowed. "I," said Ettore, and stopped. Then he began again. Probably the "I" was a crow of ego-jubilation. "I have received, as a present, because it is my festa, three quails. 'No,' I said to the friend who presented them to me, 'it must be four, for there are four signori at La Collina.' 'But,' said my friend, 'the quails are for you, my brave Ettore. For you I shot them.' "—And here, Ettore spread a magnificent gesture, showing how he had conveyed to his friend that quails were nothing to him, nowadays, situated as he was, having lamb at least twice a week, instead of only on Easter Sunday, like the less privileged of his class. "So he gave me four quails, and," as a climax, "they will be for your lunch."

The signore thanked him, and Theo said that she adored quails. Ettore bowed, Theo bowed.

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"I," began Ettore again, "I have been down to the firm who are putting in the signori's bathroom, and have adjusted with them, so that we pay *after* for a week the baths have been successful; not on the first day, when all looks very nice, and we cannot tell yet if it is going to work well. One can talk, and talk, with no effect to these people, when they have already received their soldi. But now, they will work carefully, knowing that mistakes mean delay in payment. Il capitano,"—turning a reproachful eye on Captain Locke, who had bestowed the bathroom as his gift, in benison to La Collina and its inmates—"il capitano would have paid at once, directly they asked. But I, no! Moreover, I have here"—another conjuring trick—"a watering-pot. I received it as a present from the firm who are putting in the bath, I. The signore told me to buy a watering-pot, but why buy one, when you can have one given? I said to the manager, I: 'We have spent so much at your shop. It is customary for you, a high-class firm, a serious firm, and you a good man of business, to give a present to the value of a few lire.' It is an excellent watering-pot."

He stood silent again, at the end, as at the beginning of his recital, to receive the last sheaf of congratulations and approval; and then went away to change his new clothes.

Neither the quails nor the watering-pot had been

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presents, so perhaps his pride of achievement was justified. He had bought the quails; but he had thrown round himself, at the same time, an aura of generosity, of renunciation, of careless lordliness, and of being the sort of man who is on giving terms with sportsmen. As for the watering-pot, his falsehood relating to that, had proved that he was a shrewd man at a bargain. It was by the invention of exploits such as these, that he had gradually managed to pay back to the signori, without their knowing it, bit by bit, the whole three thousand lire of which he had robbed them, bit by bit, and with equal skill and adjustment, the year before.

It was as easy to pay Dobbiaco for carriages thrice, to the station and back, and not put down the charges to the signori's account, as it had been to slip in a charge for Dobbiaco's carriage three times when they had not had it at all. As easy, but not so pleasant. But patience. Next year. . . .

[III]

After Ettore had gone, Johnny opened his letters. They had all been for him, with the exception of one for Elizabeth. Theo and Captain Locke still lazily carried on the discussion on slavery and freedom. Not being the typical sailor of fiction, Captain Locke found it quite possible to talk without

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introducing that delightful nautical jargon which usually makes his type quite incomprehensible to the rest of the world. Suddenly a sharp exclamation from Johnny cut through their absorption:

"Theo! I say, Elworthy Pinkerton is dead."

Theo was silent for a moment. Then she spoke in that particularly level voice which covers excitement: "That means you'll get his job, if we . . ."

"Yes," said Johnny.

"You wouldn't take it?"

It was Elizabeth who spoke. She had suddenly turned scarlet, as though the matter concerned her very nearly. The Captain, the only one uninitiated into the consequences of an unknown Pinkerton's death, looked enquiringly from one face to another.

"A thumping legacy?" he asked.

"Elworthy Pinkerton was the principal reader and literary consultant and so forth, at Radletts—you know, the publishers. It's Radlett and Mostyn, really. Mostyn's the junior partner, but most of the work falls on him. Old Radlett sleeps, and grunts occasionally in his sleep. Mostyn's a great pal of mine. This is a particularly topping job: you can choose your own hours, more or less, to be at the office; and you do the social side, and take the big pots out to lunch, stand them drinks and find out if their present contracts with other firms are going to stand or not; then you read all the manuscripts that

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aren't scum—the lower order of readers are attending to the scum; and you pronounce final judgment. Oh, it's jolly interesting, really, with a sort of Diplomatic Service touch to it, that I like."

"But where does Pinkerton come in?"

"He's dead," said Johnny, as if that settled it; and went over to examine, with critical tenderness, one of the young lemon-trees. He had planted it.

Captain Locke turned to Theo for enlightenment.

"When Bertie Mostyn bought his share in the firm, he found Pinkerton already established for the past thirty or forty years, getting well beyond usefulness. But he couldn't turn him out, though he said Johnny was just the man he wanted. He's only keen on the actual business side of it himself, you see, not the literary. But he promised Johnny that, if ever Pinkerton resigned—"

"Pinkerton seems to have resigned to some purpose."

"I think Johnny is a beast to be glad!" This was again Elizabeth.

Theo glanced at her curiously. "Why do you feel so hot about it, Beth?"

"I'm thinking of—of—" Elizabeth stumbled, recovered herself with a gasp, and plunged on boldly:

"I'm thinking of 'Vanna and Ettore."

For nobody knew for certain that Elizabeth had an ardent understanding with young Cyril Pinkerton,

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the only son of the man who had just died. Cyril was a journalist, too, with high-brow aspirations. She and Cyril could be married as soon as he was making enough to equal her own three hundred a year. It wasn't fair, Elizabeth reflected indignantly, that the post of literary advisor to Messrs. Radlett should not be an hereditary one. What had Johnny done to deserve it? At the moment, she was hating her cousin, and hating Theo still more, who seemed to take it for granted, in her cool way, that all good things should go to Johnny, because there was a cosmic bias in favour of whatever was her property. But Elizabeth did not want to explain all this, so she pulled in the first handy excuse for her anger: 'Vanna and Ettore.

"Johnny," Theo called out. "Come back here. What's going to happen?" she continued, as, without speaking, he flung himself down on the grass beside her. "Who was your news from? Bertie Mostyn?"

He nodded.

"Are you going to let the house, when you go back?"

Captain Locke, too, was feeling apprehensive at the probable results of Pinkerton's death; though he would always try not to show it. He liked this house; he liked Italy; he liked Johnny and Theo and Elizabeth; he liked his narrow slit of a room, in which he could keep all the windows tightly closed, and

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pretend it was the dear stuffy old cabin of a ship; and he certainly did not like the grim, elderly sister, who lived in Chelborough, and with whom he would have to share a home if ever the Morgans should give up theirs. His only excuse at present was that a hotter climate suited him better than the English one. In fact, he had even gone so far as wickedly to hint at some mysterious ailment acquired in the South Seas, and for which the air of Chelborough would not be propitious. But his South Sea ailment would have to go now, with La Collina. He was always too haphazard and generous with his small pension ever to have any of it left in his pocket for stern purposes of rent, meat and drink; that bathroom had cost him a quarter's income. But his mouth went awry at the thought of Sophia, and her rules of propriety. Life here had been good. He sighed, pulled out his tobacco pouch, and refilled his pipe.

"*If* we go," said Johnny, correcting the captain's 'when,' "we'll sell the house, not let it. Letting is a nuisance. Stanton Prince said that he would buy it like a shot, last time he was here. He married an Italian, as you know, and they've lived in Italy for years. He's on the look-out for another house. His own villa began sliding down the hill, for some reason or other. They tried to coax it back, and to hold it together with ropes and bands of iron and so forth. Apparently, once a house begins to go downhill, noth-

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ing can stop it. He would give me a good price for La Collina, at any moment. Is he still at Ospedaletti, do you know, Theo?"

"No; the last time I heard, they were going to be at Rapallo, hunting for a villa, until the nineteenth. What's the date to-day?"

"The nineteenth," said Elizabeth, quickly.

"Then it's too late. Heaven knows where they were going to be, next!"

"As though a brainless girl ever knew a date correctly!" Captain Locke teased Elizabeth. "It's the eighteenth." And a shade of impatience passed over the girl's pretty face.

"The eighteenth! Then there *is* time! Shall I send a telegram, Johnny? Ettore can take it down."

Elizabeth asked: "Will they, Stanton Prince and his wife, take on 'Vanna and Ettore with the house? I suppose they will?"

"No. They—" Then Theo stopped. "Oh, I suppose they will," she finished lamely, echoing Elizabeth.

"Why did you say 'no'?"

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Theo and Elizabeth were enemies, ready to take advantage of each other's slips, each ready to press the other into a corner, each following an invisible purpose. They had been such good friends up till now. But Mr. Elworthy Pinkerton's entirely respectable death from

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double-pneumonia was responsible for a queer conflicting set of moods, on the little lawn of a Mediterranean villa. . . .

Theo's honesty got the better of her queerly precautionary attitude towards Elizabeth: "The Princes won't take on 'Vanna and Ettore—they've got their own servants—had them for years—Italians, of course. They couldn't turn them adrift."

"*They* couldn't," repeated Elizabeth, with mocking inflection.

"Out with it!" flashed Theo. "Do you expect Johnny to give up what he has been wanting all his life, and a safe eight hundred a year into the bargain, because of 'Vanna and Ettore?"

Captain Locke stirred uncomfortably. "Can't you take 'em to England?" he suggested.

"I would love to, but it wouldn't do. They'd be utterly miserable. They wouldn't transplant. They're Italian—indigenous to the soil. Can you imagine them in London, in a London house, with London ways and English servants? 'Vanna's happy knack of coming to sit with us, and talk, whenever she feels lonely in the kitchen? and Ettore—do you remember when he suddenly appeared round the corner of the house, taking the dogs for a walk?—quite unconcerned that on his head was a pink paper carnival cap rescued from the waste-paper basket where I'd thrown it."

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And, whatever might have been the secret feelings of the quartet, they all agreed that 'Vanna and Ettore were of Italy, and would die elsewhere. But Elizabeth's indignation, on behalf of the absent Cyril, had, without her definite intention, merged into genuine pity for the unconscious couple whose fate was now in the balance.

"But, Theo, you can't just give them notice in the ordinary way, with a month's wages, as though they were ordinary servants!"

"Don't be sentimental," growled Johnny, from under the shelter of his hat, which he had pulled down over his face, presumably against the sun's rays.

"Sentimental! I'm human. You and Theo are a mass of selfishness. You're dying to be the important man in a big publishing firm, and Theo's longing to be back in England again, in London, where all her friends are, who think she's a great painter, and admire her for it. You've let these two believe that you're here more or less for life."

"We haven't," interrupted Theo. "We never mentioned time. We just drifted. They assumed it was for life. I can't help that. I can't help it if they take root, and believe in Providence. It's Providence that failed them, not I!"

Captain Locke came in, excitedly, on Elizabeth's side. He liked Ettore and 'Vanna, and besides that,

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there was Sophia in Chelborough. . . . Every man for himself!

"Providence is all very well, my dear, but you can't shove it all on Providence like that. Providence is overworked. After all, these two creatures, they've given you their work and been paid for it—that's all right—but you must understand that they've given you a bit more than that. Johnny can call me sentimental, if he likes. I don't care a damn for Johnny. Come down to brass-tacks; they've given you love, and single-minded zeal, and a devotion to your interests that you don't deserve."

"Darling old Ted, do you really imagine that Ettore has not been utterly swindling us every time he entered up a few stamps or half a kilo of coffee in his books? He was quite right to do it, of course, and Johnny and I were much too lazy to stop it. He saved us endless trouble, and we were willing to pay for this—and there you are! And for the last year, expenses have been so abnormally small that he must be doing us tremendously in some other direction, or else more is still to come. I confess that I'm much more alarmed since the books have been down, than I was when I could clearly see what Ettore thought would be invisible to our confiding dew-washed eyes. But for Heaven's sake, don't talk of our servants as though they were dumb driven cattle with piteous

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eyes; as though they were a pair of helpless Babes in the Wood, and we were the Wicked Uncles! We were very lucky to get them, and we've all been very happy together. It's worked beautifully, and it would have gone on working beautifully; but when you come down to brass-tacks, as you say, it's each for himself. I can't stand all this Russian-novelist sort of wish-wash!"

But Theo was speaking a great deal more brutally than she felt, for she was not at all sure of Johnny yet. . . . She must get Johnny alone. For all his genial boyish ways on the surface, he was reserved in some things.

Not until this chance had come, had she been so shaken with longing for England again.

[IV]

She left the others, and wandered up the track that led through the garden into the misty sunshine of the olives beyond. Because it was she who, of all of them, most wanted to leave Italy, she could afford, more than they, to yield herself, now, to all the poignant charm of it; to suffer in advance some of the "Italy sickness," which would be bound to follow her from the country of olives to the country of beeches and elms and other trees that turned brown in the Autumn.

All the garden at the back of the house had been

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planted with red and gold: pepperone, tomatoes, melons, pumpkins, and cucumbers; and down the hill-side, in front of the house, were the peach-trees; and trees that here carried carelessly their white stars—flowers in England so rare and solemn: lemons and oranges in bloom; mandarins and nespoli—all these fruits Theo could have had if she had waited long enough in Italy; more brilliant glowing balls of red and gold, growing out of the hot earth. . . .

She lay down in a circle of flowers, that clustered thickly round each olive-tree, where the ground had been dug, and cultivated, and tended for hundreds of years by the Ligurian peasants. First, in February, the jonquils pushed up, ring after ring; then came purple-time . . . violets and anemones and dark grape-hyacinths; circles bloomed and circles died, round each crusted grey bole; snowy white and vivid blue followed up next—garlic and borage; and when these rings faded away, silvery-mauve thistles and poppies took their place. Theo's head was tilted back on to wild thyme, and the smell of wild thyme was in the wind that blew softly across her face . . . she let herself sink voluptuously into Italy's arms, as she had never done before, because before it might have hurt too much, when "Italy" had also meant "no England." Italy. . . . In no other land did the sea and sky show in patches of just such a depth and clearness of blue, as shut between the writhen boughs

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of the wild fig and the old, old olives. In no other land did the cypress stand up so straight and tall and sombre; sometimes in twos and threes against the church, which always lifted a campanile higher than any other roof in its mountain village; sometimes one cypress distinct in loneliness among the hazy foliage that later on in the day would look like wet black and sharp silver when the sun, slanting lower, struck sideways at the leaves. The hills swept round the bay, and were pushed back against the sky like the semi-circle of a great, careless amphitheatre. Theo knew the line of them by heart. It was her trade to see and remember, not only to see and adore. She knew just where the waving line of the hills was broken by a low ragged fringe of pines, along the top; and then again, where nothing disturbed their plain meeting with the sky. Italy!—And at night the valley's darkness would be all a-glitter and on the move with tiny reeling fireflies, and tumultuous with fragrance. . . . Italy! "—But I'm going to England!" sang Theo's heart, joyfully, underneath her last silent declaration of romantic passion for the hills, and the vines, and the incredible sea, and the walls that held up the terraces; honey-coloured, no-coloured, parti-coloured walls, now spurting jets of deep pink valerian; could one leave these things if one really loved them? Johnny, for instance, who talked so little about Italy and his love for Italy, who

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could not even catch it in bold strokes of paint, and keep it that way—Would Johnny leave Italy? or would the charm of her easy, lazy, knavish ways, her sudden darts of greed, her sheer abandonment, stronger than acquiescence, to fate and the sendings of fate, keep him here, and keep her with him? Everybody looked happy in Italy, because life lay near the surface, and nothing was buried; dishonesty and self-interest were tumbled up from the depths, where they usually lay hidden; shot up to the top, shamelessly winking at you. And those who wanted to sing, and those who wanted to laugh, or to kiss, they sang and laughed and kissed, when and where they wanted; and those who wanted to kill—well, the knife was very near the surface, too, and anger and shrill voices. . . . Love-making was forever on the pavement, and Christ was carried again and again in effigy through the streets. . . . And beneath Theo's fallen eyelids sprang suddenly a memory of 'Vanna, standing jovial in the open doorway at the top of the three steps between the kitchen and the dining-room! Her eyes were slits of laughter, her mouth broadly smiling; she swayed and waved her hands to the rhythm of what she sang, to make pleasure for the Signora: a somewhat high-pitched, tuneless ditty of the streets. Her voice was monotonous, noisy, eternally gay. . . . "It's a barbarous country," cried Theo aloud, suddenly antagonistic to

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Italy. She adored 'Vanna. 'Vanna was wonderful —but that voice, when she sang, symbolized a power, a savagery of self-preservation, which Theo and Johnny lacked, though they concealed this from themselves, because they were indolent, and it suited them to conceal it. They were not wholly without business instincts—no intelligent person ever is. Even a true poet, unless he be posing, is on speaking terms with his halfpennies. But the Morgans' sense of self-protection was not persistent, like a peasant's, like Ettore's; it waxed and waned, fitfully. They did not mind being hoodwinked and exploited, as long as they kept sufficient hold of their wits to be able to laugh, and say: "Yes, we know it. It is our own wish. We know it, and so we can stop it any moment we like." But these half-humorous, half-scornful acceptances sometimes angered Theo, when her understanding was fastidious enough to recognize them as merely an excuse. She would have been a better man if she had stood up to Italy, and fought her, inch by inch, doggedly, as so many English do, who come abroad—the Won't-be-done-by-foreigners spirit. . . . Was it carrying tolerance too far, to let oneself be done by foreigners? by Italy? by the magic and spell of bland, unscrupulous Italy? and then to say, with a shrug of the shoulders: "It suits me?"

—Get away from it! Quick, while there is time! Don't let romance and sentiment hold you, nor love

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for 'Vanna. 'Vanna took it for granted that the English were going to stay for ever with them at La Collina, and that they were going to stay for ever with the English. Responsibilities! —It was worse than marriage! Why, even Elizabeth, even Ted, both English, were looking at Theo askance, now, because she dared suggest leaving 'Vanna and Ettore, leaving La Collina, snapping with Italy. Freedom? It was slavery! Theo's eyes were sombre and defiant; her fingers clenched on the valerian that she had picked without noticing what she did, crushed it, and then flung it away, as though she were flinging away something tangible that had held her too fast.

For she knew it—she was betraying 'Vanna, who had trusted her. By urging this break for England, instead of combating it, she was letting hail upon 'Vanna, again, all the little hard cruelties that the peasant woman was so afraid of: no bed, perhaps; not sufficient food, perhaps; aches and pains, and enforced parting from Ettore; uncertainty of the morrow; lamb only once a year, on Easter Sunday, instead of, proudly, twice a week. 'Vanna had been so happy with the signora; curiously enough—Theo knew it—believing the signora to be kinder, more sympathetic, less likely to hurt her, than the padrone. 'Vanna had loved Johnny too, certainly. Most people loved Johnny. But in Italy, the man of the house is

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also he who holds your destiny in his hands, and can destroy you if he will, so that 'Vanna clung closer to la signora, confided in her about her so unfortunately quick temper, her sciatica, her joy in the eleven eggs laid by eleven hens in one day—"There are no hens like those at La Collina, signora!"—Acted, for her benefit, the "Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ," as she had seen it one night at the Santa Nucia theatre. . . . And Theo had not been able to keep the tears back, as 'Vanna, her droll, ugly, brown face luminous and inspired by the joy of simple tragedy, had been transformed—now into Mary, the Mother, meeting her Son carrying the Cross; now answering in the voice of Christ. "And see, signora, He wore a robe of this colour!" . . . 'Vanna held out the scarlet duster in her hand, and then wiped her eyes with it, and lent it to Theo for the same purpose. She was good all through, this woman, and humble, and human; Theo said to herself: "Humility isn't a bowed weak quality, after all!"—for in 'Vanna it showed itself as surely something glad and strong, to be able genuinely to think so little of personal claims. 'Vanna was ripely, vividly alive, quick to pull fun out of daily life, as a clown pulls rolls of paper out of his hat in carnival; quick to console, when she fancied the signora was ill or unhappy. Was she a fool to throw all this away, Theo wondered? No, it was dependence. Each for himself! 'Vanna and Ettore

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for themselves, she and Johnny for themselves! That was how the appearance of unity suddenly rolled back and divided. After all, Theo argued, if, for instance, there came a call for 'Vanna and Ettore, from their own people, from Turin, a call for help, or a promise of great gain, whichever it was, 'Vanna's heart would wrinkle in agony at breaking faith with la signora—but she would go.

So Theo mused, along the same hard, practical lines as Ettore: she for the signori, he for "we others." One must do the best one can for oneself. And 'Vanna, who really loved her master and mistress, Johnny, who really loved Italy—they would be the victims, as they were the real romantics of the quartet. Or not quite victims, perhaps, because they would be convinced, and come willingly. The pantomine of attachment went on, of devotion and service and consideration. Underneath it, the classes fought, men and women fought—Theo and Ettore fought.

"Johnny!" she called out, seeing him approach through the trees.

Now. . . .

"Johnny," she began . . .

[v]

When Theo and Johnny strolled back to the house, from their sojourn among the olives, their staff was sitting at the table outside the kitchen-door; and,

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under shelter of the rough vine-covered trellis which Johnny had put up for them, were enjoying their lunch. Theo thought, with that exasperation which springs from guilt, that never until to-day had they looked quite so *settled*. They might have been sitting there every day, at just that time, for the last ten, or even twenty years; and certainly they looked as though they might sit there for twenty years to come; Ettore wearing, for coolness' sake, a pink cotton pyjama-top frogged with pale green, which Theo had recently thrown into the waste-paper basket, because she no longer used it; Marietta with the dull red scarf, that suited her so well, twisted round her black head; 'Vanna fanning herself with a large leaf. Even the straw-covered bottle, which stood tipsily in the middle of the table, even the pattern thrown by the sun through the vine-leaves on the rough blue tablecloth, and Uatti and Keem lying expectantly hopeful of scraps, one on either side of the water-barrel—all seemed to share in that air of comfortable permanence.

'Vanna called out joyfully to the signori as they passed, bidding them not forget to be home for tea, as the cake with "St. Ettore" across it in pink sugar, had to be ceremoniously cut into slices, by the hand of la signora. In the same way, Theo had been obliged to eat the first egg laid in their own hen-house; to eat the first green peas from their own rows.

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Damn them! thought Theo, to cover the tenderness which, without her sanction, had penetrated her indifference. . . . They were such dears! But Johnny swaggered past them without even a look, only calling over his shoulder: "Dinner, 'Vanna! I'm hungry." And she asked, anxiously: "Is the signore angry?" "No, no, 'Vanna. Of course not. He wants his dinner. You know what men are!" 'Vanna was always responsive to a call of womanly intimacy: "Si, si, si, si, si. Ettore is the same. I tell him he is getting too fat, but what do you want? He still eats too much!" She looked proudly at Ettore's girth, and he laughed, and made some joke to the effect that all wives should be thankful for a fat husband, because it meant good-temper; and anyhow, 'Vanna only fed him well, to win what she wanted from him. And he held out his hand to 'Vanna; and then asked the signora if she would not take a glass of wine with them, because it was his home-made wine, which had lain mellowing ever since last autumn. He had forgotten, or else forgiven, that devastating moment when she and Johnny had returned from their summer holiday in the Dolomites: They had first sipped this proffered wine, rather rejoicing in the romantic notion of a Collina vintage pressed out from grapes of the vineyard which themselves had seen a burning patch in the sunset on the hill opposite. —"Not pressed out by Ettore in person, though, I

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trust," Johnny had murmured apprehensively. —But then they had had to break it to their henchman that it was not good wine—"Or, at least," Theo had amended hastily, "it's excellent wine, but not such as the English drink. The English are ill if they drink this sort of wine." For in truth, it was very thin, very sour; and if they had not told Ettore so, they would have had to buy it from him, and drink it all through the winter, neglecting the good white and red wines of the country, neglecting Moscata and Barola and Barbira and Nebiolo.

From time to time, to avoid hurting Ettore's and 'Vanna's feelings, Theo had to invent a whole set of miraculous untruths, relating to these curious people, the English: the English, whose doctors forbade too much pasta; the English, whose digestions could suffer neither garlic nor Ettore's wine; the English, who died unless they had bacon and eggs for breakfast—yes, slowly faded away and died; the English, whom no open windows nor fresh air could hurt; the English, whose men and maidens could walk together freely without harm, without parental interference or espionage—"Because, look you, 'Vanna, they are so cold, the English!" "But what a marvel!" 'Vanna would say to these things, and "But can it be true?" Perhaps her funniest illusion about the English occurred on one evening of impromptu fancy-dress, when Theo had appeared in tights, tunic

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crossed at the hip with belt and pouch, and hat with a long jaunty feather—Dick Whittington complete.

"Tell me, signora," 'Vanna had said, admiring her, "what this costume signifies?"

And Theo, in a hurry, and at a loss how to explain the quaintness of principal-boy tradition, had replied: "Oh, this, 'Vanna, this. . . . It is the costume worn by the Lord Mayor of London. You know, 'Vanna, the syndico, as in Santa Nucia there is a syndico."

"Mà!" exclaimed 'Vanna, greatly impressed. "It is thus, then, that the English Mayor dresses himself?"

And Theo strutted off, chuckling at a sudden vision of 'Vanna, one future day, waiting outside the doors of the Mansion House, hoping to see the Lord Mayor come out in his tights and hose and feathered hat, over his shoulder a red bundle tied on to a stick.

She drank Ettore's health, now, in his own wine, a trifle fruitier than it had been eight months ago; and complimented him, not too effusively, lest he should try and bargain again for the sale of it to the signori; and then went slowly in to her lunch.

Now that she had persuaded Johnny, now that they had made up their minds to sell the house and go to England, for Johnny to take up the post of distinguished literary adviser to Messrs. Radlett, Publishers, her fighting spirit had ebbed away. She felt

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listless, mournful. What good had it been, starting this home? Her small head, its pale gold hair curving smoothly as a single wave inwards to the nape, drooped on to her hand. She sat thus at table, without eating anything, brooding.

Johnny, on the other hand, appeared to be in tremendous high spirits: "You'd better buck up, Theo, outwardly, at least, before Ettore sees you, or he'll try and cheer you with a squint at his stuffed dog with four heads!"

Theo shuddered. The stuffed dog with four heads was Ettore's dearest treasure, the pride of his heart. He kept it in an ornate chocolate-box, on a bed of pale blue satin; and solemnly produced it, as a treat, whenever the signori or any of their visitors showed signs of feeling depressed or ill. Molly Jamieson, suffering once from a nervous headache, had screamed and fainted, when unexpectedly the "curio" had been thrust two inches away from her nose: "To make pleasure for the Signora Jummison because I saw, I, that she suffered pain," Ettore had explained, good-naturedly. "A pity that she fainted, as ladies sometimes do, before she had time to see what it was that I would have shown to her! . . ."

Johnny continued to talk a lot of his plans, of the wonderful luck of poor old Pinkerton's death, of his keenly interesting job awaiting him, and the jolly old interviews that he would have with the Great for

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whose autobiographies the firm were angling. He talked wilfully, and with great rattle of sentences, about the mistake it was, when one was still young, to give up ambition, and to bury oneself, and drift, and moon, and laze, in a country where ideas dissolved into mere dreams, and where there was too much sunshine for energy ever to harden into action. He talked as though he were actually smashing up, with the new blatant vigour of his voice, those tranquil sweet-tempered days they had all enjoyed, basking in the warm, clear sea; those no less peaceful evenings on the verandah, listening to frog-lullabies.

"So you have made up your minds," said Captain Locke. Chelborough floated, an unlovely vision, between him and his plateful of curling spaghetti. He sighed . . . Sophia, no doubt, would still kick up an infernal fuss if an unregenerate male smoked between courses, at her meals!

"Made them up? There was no question of making them up! They were made up the second I got the letter. Why do you ask if our minds are made up?" a truculent Johnny badgered him. "As though anyone but a born idiot would miss a chance like this! I'd deserve to go under, if I did. Besides, Theo said—"

Elizabeth interrupted, impudently: "Theo said—everything that you have just been handing on to us as your own, I suppose?"

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Theo lifted her eyelids, and merely looked at Elizabeth. The girl flushed, but went on: "I can always tell when Johnny is being original, and when he's only quoting."

"Clever of you," murmured Theo. They were all enemies, that day. "Well, what *does* Theo say? Go on, Johnny, tell Elizabeth; she wants to hear."

Johnny subsided from a smoky conflagration to a mere sulky fire, that can barely be coaxed to light, for dampness of the wood.

"Don't know," he muttered. "Forgot. It wasn't important."

Ettore knocked at the door—"Permesso?" came down the three steps into the dining-room, stood for a moment in his usual portentous silence: "I go to the post," he said. "Is there anything for me to take? I expect to-day the mosquito-netting, which I have ordered specially from Turin, so that it shall be finely woven. Very expensive netting—it is what the young girls use for their confirmation veils, really."

"Telegram, Johnny," prompted Theo, not raising her eyes from steady contemplation of her plate.

"Lord, yes! That telegram to the Princes! Wait a moment, Ettore—there's a telegram."

"I can wait, I! There is no hurry," Ettore conceded, superbly, like one who has time to bestow as a gift.

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"At Rapallo, did you say they were? What hotel?"

"I don't remember, and I don't think I kept the letter. Would they be known in Rapallo, d'you think? If we just put their name?"

"Try poste-restante," suggested the captain. "If they're travelling about, as you say they are, looking for a house, they may quite possibly order their letters and things sent to the poste-restante, wherever they go."

Theo nodded. "That's best. It's no good waiting, because they leave Rapallo to-morrow."

They consulted Ettore as to the Italian for "poste-restante"; then Johnny printed on the telegram: DO YOU WANT TO BUY OUR HOUSE AT ONCE—

" 'Instantly,' " Elizabeth corrected him. "One word less."

—IF SO WIRE AFFIRMATIVE WE LEAVE FOR ENGLAND SOON FIRST OPTION YOURS MORGAN. . . .

And he reflected, grimly, that it was as well Ettore understood no English.

"Can you read it, Ettore?"

" 'Preens. Posta Ferma, Rapallo.' Si, si. You have not the address of the Signor Preens?"

He remembered the latter with a special clearness, because of a great deal of trouble he had had at the station, seeing him off, after a visit to La Collina. Il Signor Prince's trunk had been torn, and Ettore

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had had to superintend while it was being sewn up in canvas, and roped, and sealed, and officially recognized by the station-master. Signor Prince had almost missed his train, but he, Ettore, had helped him in at the last moment, and remembered to give him his luggage receipt, and had generally managed things with his usual competence, foresight and sagacity. So he recalled Signor Prince well—perhaps, also, because of the extra large tip.

"No, we can't find the address, Ettore. See that it goes at once, won't you?"

"I will see to it, I! They know me there. They will send a telegram that I take, before all others. Good appetite!" quoth Ettore, and bowing, left them, the telegram in his pocket. "I have also the telegram of the signorina to send off," he added, reassuringly, to Elizabeth.

"Whom did you wire to, Beth?"

Elizabeth's temper shot up like a rocket. "Isn't your own business enough for the moment?" —She pushed back her chair, and dashed away from the table.

[VI]

An hour later, Ettore returned with the afternoon letters, and the receipt for the telegram he had sent off. He was very punctilious about delivering re-

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ceipts. It grieved him to see the vague and haphazard way in which Theo and Johnny used to put them down anywhere, and lose them.

A startled exclamation from Theo brought Johnny over from where he stood with his back to them, at one of the six windows of the sun-room, moodily staring out at his hedge of sweet-peas, planted from English seed, his especial pride in their Italian garden.

"What is it?"

"A post-card from Rapallo. Isn't it queer? If only it had come a couple of hours earlier! —Hotel Bella Vista. Now we shall have to send another wire to make sure." She turned to Ettore. "Will you be going down to the city again, Ettore—to the shop, perhaps?"

"I can go down if the signora wants me to," said Ettore. "I was not going down, but I can."

"That's the most good-natured chap in the world," growled the captain, in English. "If you sent him down twenty times, he wouldn't grumble."

"What service does the signora want? It is no trouble."

"Why, I'm afraid it's the same telegram to the Signor Prince. His address is on that post-card, you see, so he won't call at the posta ferma."

Ettore smiled slowly, superbly, and let his chest expand. "I," he said. "I," . . . and then no

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more for a minute. It was as though he could not get past his ecstasy of self-contemplation. Finally, with the perfect simplicity which belongs to all great art: "I have already addressed the telegram that I sent, to the Hotel Bella Vista, instead of to the posta ferma. When they handed me the post-card, I saw the post-mark on it 'Rapallo,' and I said to myself: 'What if this is from the Signor Preens, of whose address the signori were ignorant!' So I read the signature, only that, and no more, and I saw it was indeed from the Signor Preens. So on the telegram, before I sent it off, I changed 'posta ferma' to 'Hotel Bella Vista.' There will be no need to send another."

"By Jove!" muttered Johnny, aghast at such perfect organization; and he stared at Ettore, still expanding in the sunshine of their awed approval.

Theo rose to the occasion, and gabbled several sentences of hectic praise. Ettore backed out of the room, murmuring: "Niente, niente!"

Captain Locke said: "I thought the irony was a bit overdone, when you made the man carry his own death-warrant down to the post. But when it comes to him seeing that the death-warrant is safely sent off, I'm damned if I like it—or you either!" He glared at Johnny and Theo.

"That's two of them," quoth Theo, airily. "We seem to be upsetting our pals to-day, Johnny. Here's a letter for you, Elizabeth," she called out, as the girl

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pushed open the sun-room door, and came draggingly in, her mouth sullen, and her chin squared to some indomitable purpose of her own. "It's from Cyril Pinkerton, I think," added Theo.

And the captain said, in the jocular, teasing way in which men of his stamp always address fresh young girls: "Haven't you kept that young man waiting long enough, Elizabeth? If I'd been in his place, I'd have had you aboard the lugger long ago! Hanging about is a mug's game."

"We don't want to hang about," Elizabeth said, her blue eyes fixed accusingly on Theo. "I wired Cyril just now to try and get his father's job at Radlett's."

"You did *what?*"

Johnny swung round from the window. The captain suddenly stood up. The issue was between Theo and Elizabeth, and the men remained silent, watching them.

"You did what?" repeated Theo.

"I wasn't going to tell you at first; then I thought I would. I don't want to be dishonest."

"You don't call this dishonesty, by any chance?" queried Theo, her voice like silk.

"No, I don't," sturdily. "You said 'each man for himself,' didn't you, Theo, when we rubbed it in that you were letting down 'Vanna and Ettore?"

Theo suddenly began to laugh. "Each man for

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himself!" . . . But it was really funny how angry you were, when anyone else, besides yourself, applied this principle.

"All right! Cyril hasn't an earthly chance, because the job has been already promised to Johnny as soon as it should fall vacant. But I see your point in wiring him."

"I'm hanged if I do!" shouted Johnny, whose nerves were apparently in a very bad state. "I call it infernal treachery. It doesn't matter a curse whether your Cyril has any chance of the job or not. The point is that you're staying in our house, and you hear our confidential letters read, and then you go and act on what you've heard, and have the cheek, into the bargain, to use our servant to carry down your beastly telegrams to the post! Carry them down yourself, another time!"

He could not analyze why he felt so angry, so ragingly, crimsonly angry. He just knew that he hated all of them; hated old Pinkerton for dying, and Mostyn for having promised him this job he had always coveted; hated Prince for wanting to buy a house in Italy at such an inopportune—such an opportune—moment for them; hated Ettore for being officious about the telegram, which otherwise might not have reached Prince in time; savagely hated the captain, whose opinion he secretly so valued, for turning against him in this; hated 'Vanna for her

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wistful, troubled eyes, when she had asked, smitten by his roughness, whether the signore were angry—Why the hell should he be angry? He could not stand emotional exhibitions from his servants—servants were machines, slaves. As for Theo—his thoughts slanted aside from Theo, unwilling to remember some of the things she had said to him today, among the olives, when they had discussed the question of giving up La Collina and going to England. It was queer, because he usually liked to think about Theo; about certain ways of hers and a slightly mocking inflection that underlay her voice; her thin, boyish figure in the straight little frocks of white linen, that she was so fond of wearing; the smooth thickness of her fair hair, pale as moonlight. . . . That incident, last year, when he had caught her secretly tiptoeing among the strawberry-beds in the rich-coloured dawn; a rogue absurdly engaged in stealing her own strawberries, after she had made a rigid vow, for herself and the household, that none were to be picked before the first of June. . . . "Oh, Johnny, I knew I was going to break the law, and that's why I made it—it's so tame to be able to gather and eat all the strawberries I want. Don't tell—la Signora, will you?" "You thieving little idiot!" he laughed—but she stopped his lips with kisses and ripe red berries. . . . Theo! Theo!

He was quite ridiculously fond of Theo! And,

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after all, they had chatted about the business in hand, with complete amiability; and he had agreed with her almost all the time, even when she had said that gardening was too pottering and elderly an occupation for a strong young man.

. . . Pottering! Beastly word—made one think of the sooty rectangles that lie behind the little suburban houses, which stretch north and south and west of London: Pottering in the garden, and geraniums, and packets of seed—But here he had had to cut the whole thing out of the bare hillside: lay his own paths, and build his own walls; carry heavy stones; wrench out, with pick and spade, stubborn old olive-roots from their obdurate tenure in the earth. Was that quite the same thing as—pottering, he had wondered, miserably? but had not liked to ask, for fear she would laugh and not understand. Wiser not to take risks, when it was your boast that your wife subtly understood all things. . . .

It had grown well in two years, this garden of his making; and the truth was that he had given it more work and more affection than to his writing; his writing had been neglected; he had scribbled a story or an article now and again, and was rather ashamed of caring so little about success or failure in literary expression—form and style had meant quite a lot to him, once; but out here, it had seemed a pity, somehow, not to plunge down the hill and into the sea,

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every spare moment; to swim and to dive, and to sail a boat, without formal changes of costume for all these various pastimes, but just accepting them as woven into those careless, timeless days, when you wear shorts and an open-throated shirt all the time, and your hair curls, and your knees grow brown and hard . . . Theo had said that that was the way one drifted, and became a—what was the expression she had used, this morning? A Riviera lounger. . . . His mouth twisted wryly at the bitter thought of it. "This is not the Riviera," he had contradicted. "It's Italy." "Oh, Johnny, what a quibble!" But it wasn't a quibble. The Riviera was surely a place of palms, and promenades, and sunshades, and men looking idiots in "immaculate white." "Immaculate" be blowed! But "lounger"—perhaps she had been right there. He had enjoyed lounging, as he had never enjoyed it before. Paradoxically, it seemed to him less a waste of time to lie in the sun doing nothing, watching the clumsy flight of a grasshopper, with its brilliant scarlet belly, hearing the huge flying beetle bumble on its short iridescent blue wings heavily past his ear, or looking over the rail of a stream to watch amusedly while Kim leaped up among the tall rushes in his futile endeavours to catch a luminous streak that was a dragon-fly—less a waste of time to do all these things than to be sitting at his table, busily scratching: "Impressions of Italy" on

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to blank white paper. "We're too young to be out of it all, Johnny. I like feeling braced and fit, in mind as well as body." And she had said something about shirkers—

And that had finished it. . . .

[VII]

Elizabeth said now, primly and coldly: "I apologize for sending Ettore with my telegram. I daresay it was a breach of manners, under the circumstances."

"Oh Lord!" exclaimed Theo, and began to laugh again. She couldn't stop herself. They were all being such idiots, sitting round there, snarling and storming at each other. She buried her face in the cushions of the divan, and simply shook with laughter.

"Oh, I don't want a quarrel," shrugged Johnny, who wanted a quarrel more than anything else in the world, at that moment. "Only," he added, peaceably, "I'll thank any interfering little fools to leave me and my affairs alone. They don't concern anyone but myself and Theo."

"As it happens, they do. They concern 'Vanna and Ettore, too, very vitally, and they concern me and Cyril, and Captain Locke. And if I'm an interfering fool, he's one too, for he quite agrees with me that you're behaving rottenly."

The captain felt that unworthy tendency to com-

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promise, which comes to all whose confidential opinions are unexpectedly called forth in open avowal. It had been . . . pleasant, chatting with little Elizabeth, while Johnny and Theo had been absent on their walk; chatting regretfully about Johnny and Theo, and how much they both liked them both, and what their faults were, and who was the leading spirit in this impulsive break-up of the Italian life, and how happy they had all been here, and how ambition wasn't everything, and how tragic it was for poor little Elizabeth to have to wait so long and so hopelessly to get married to Cyril Pinkerton, and how nice it would be if he could find a job, a good paying job, and, moreover, a job that he liked—well, say a job like his father's. In fact, it was a bit of a shame that Johnny . . . "Only Theo—well, you know what Theo is—" "Theo's a darling!" "Yes, isn't Theo a darling! Still, if the job hadn't been promised to Johnny, it probably would have gone to Cyril, and then you two young people needn't have waited any longer. Waiting's the devil, isn't it? . . ." Yes, they had grown very intimate over this. It had been almost a debauch of confidences. Edward Locke had told her a little bit of how he dreaded Chelborough, and living with his sister Sophia: "You see, Elizabeth, I'm in lots of ways a boy still, although I'm a grizzled old 'has-been,' and when I know I can gamble a bit, and drink a bit, and swear a bit, and smoke a lot, that's

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all I want. But as soon as I know I mustn't break out in any of these things—"

"I know," Elizabeth's voice was a very cushion of sympathy. "You get defiant, and you smoke and swear and gamble much more even than you really want to, just to show your sister."

"Oh, she's been decent to me," the captain reminded himself, loyally. "She's the only one of our family who's got any principles, really. I'm afraid I'm a waster, Elizabeth."

And Elizabeth had said nothing to this, but her hand had rested for a moment, softly, on the captain's knee. . . . He was such an old darling. . . . It was really a shame of Johnny and Theo. . . .

Nevertheless, the captain regretted it now. He did not want to have to affirm boldly, with Johnny's eyes upon him, that he and Elizabeth, guests in the house, had agreed in the absence of their host and hostess, that their host and hostess were behaving badly. That in itself was bad behaviour. Elizabeth should not have dragged him in like this, for he could not entirely deny his complicity either. He thanked his stars that 'Vanna chose that moment to approach her signora with a request:

"Signora, forgive if I disturb, but I have a favour to ask on the part of myself and Ettore. Marietta can cook a plain pasta sciutta very nicely indeed, and I can prepare some cold meat and a salad, before-

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hand; and if the signori have visitors, then it will do for another day that we go, Ettore and I; but if it does not disturb you too much—"

Theo murmured, in English: "I believe, after two years, she's actually asking for a day out!" Then addressing 'Vanna, whose face was anxious, and at the same time confident of her signora's sympathy, she said: "Certainly, we can manage with salad and cold meat, 'Vanna. Where is it that you want to go? Is there a fair, somewhere?"

"Signora, I have not liked to tell you, but I have had pains—ah, such pains—just here," 'Vanna indicated the region, "although I washed it with blessed water a year ago, cara signora mia, I do not understand how it was, but perhaps I had not faith enough, for the pains did not get better. Dio, how I suffered!" voluptuous in recollection. "The doctor said it was sciatica, and he gave me some ointment, but that made no difference, and I suffered more and more. And then Ettore met a friend—that was while the signori were away in the summer—who said to him: 'I tell you, throw away the ointments that the doctor has given to your wife! Throw them all away! Yes, yes, away, I tell you! I, too, have had sciatica; I, too, have suffered. Now I am cured. What your wife must do is this: Press upon her back a poultice with a strong mustard upon it, such as we give to horses, so that it burns, burns, burns,

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burns, burns! And this she must endure at night for three hours, and then, piff, no more sciatica!'"

"Oh, 'Vanna, you didn't?" cried Theo. "I shouldn't have let you, if I'd been here."

'Vanna's eyes sparkled with anger: "That man, he must have been a horse himself. For three hours I lay there—no, I did not lie, I could not—I walked, I threw myself on the floor, I tried to fling myself from the window, I prayed, I wept, I was a martyr, I tried to bite Ettore—and he so good, saying all the time: 'Patience, 'Vanna, patience. It is worth it to be cured.' 'Patience?' I raved, 'but do not talk to me of patience or I go mad!' And he: 'Try to sleep' . . . *Sleep?*" 'Vanna's face reflected all the savage irony and exasperation which Ettore's soothing advice had stamped on it, seven months ago; she clenched her fists above her head, and shook them—"*Sleep!* And he, again: 'Our Lord, when He was on earth—' And I was cattivo, bad, Signora, for I answered: 'Don't talk to me about our Lord's sufferings, while I suffer here—' but la Madonna will forgive me for what I said then about her dear Son, not meaning it; she will understand how the poultice burnt! For three hours, signora. And then when I took it off, expecting at least that now there would be no more pain, there was a burn there, as big as a plate, red as a tomato—and still I suffered! I thought I should die with suffering!"

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All this while, 'Vanna was enduring, and dying in retrospect, her eyes rolled up, her mouth drawn at the corners; she pressed her hand on her aching back; she writhed and groaned. It was terrible, her capacity for reproductive drama.

"—After that, a blister, white, filled with water, as big—così! . . . And now," 'Vanna finished dolorously, "the sciatica has come back."

Theo tried to connect up all this with the cold meat and salad, and Marietta's pasta sciutta for the next day's lunch.

"And you want a day's jaunt to find the gentleman who recommended the horse poultice, and slip a knife into him. Is that it?"

"No, signora; it is true that I was furious with him; it is true that he has sinned, and done me wrong. But one must remember that he was, perhaps, trying to do me good. One should not kill him, therefore; one should not even hope that he still has his sciatica," said 'Vanna, a little wistfully, for perhaps her kindness had gone slightly astray along these vindictive lines. "But there is an old woman, who lives up in the mountains, two, three hours away from here. They call her a witch, but they all go to her, for she is better than any doctor. She has the gift which all have who are born at seven months. When the doctors say: 'You must die,' or 'You must have an operation,' or 'I cannot do anything,' she

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gives you a herb to lay upon the bad place, and it is healed. And she will cure my sciatica—if it does not disturb the signori?"

'Vanna was radiant again with faith and hope—radiant at the prospect of the cure, and of the delicious ease with which the old woman of the mountains could effect this cure. No more blisters, no more anguish and racked nights: "For see, signora, I say always this," 'Vanna spoke sententiously. "That a woman needs only a good husband, good health, and a sewing-machine to make her really happy. No one could want a better husband than Ettore, and now, if I lose my sciatica, there will be nothing left—except perhaps the sewing-machine, that I can wish for, up at La Collina, where the air is so fresh, and we keep hens, and the signori are so considerate, and we are all so happy together."

—Johnny and Theo and Elizabeth and the captain remained guiltily silent. Theo thought impatiently: "Of course, she *would* produce her song and dance about us, just to-day of all days." Aloud she said: "Of course you can go, 'Vanna. I hope the old devil will do you good."

"Not a devil, signora," 'Vanna corrected her. "A witch, yes, perhaps, but wise. And it does not matter being a witch, if you heal people."

"How do you mean to go?"

It appeared that they meant to walk, starting very

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early in the morning. Theo had a sudden pitiful vision of them, arm in arm, in their best clothes—'Vanna in the shawl that the signori had given her, and her high tortoise-shell comb, and black dress; Ettore, protective, in his new suit, and new boots, and hard straw sailor hat, and his hair carefully oiled. Yes, thus they would go trotting off on their naïve errand: first, along the dusty road, and then up the steep ascent by the mule-tracks. They would be very tired and very dusty by the time they arrived at their goal—and then, perhaps, it would be the horse-poultice all over again. Theo asked:

"Is there a road any part of the way to the village, where the witch lives?"

"But yes, signora, nearly all the way. Just at the very last, the road stops. But we will take the little paths up through the olives—the road will be too long and hard for our feet."

"It will be a great pleasure if you will allow me to order a carriage, as our present to you for Ettore's saint's-day," said Theo, who had picked up the habit, in Italy, of doubling the value of her gifts by bestowing them graciously and significantly, as from one duchess to another, not with the quick embarrassed fumble of one who tips a servant. 'Vanna's face shone.

"But, signora, it is too much! It will be a grand day, a jaunt. We will have Dobbiaco's carriage;

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Ettore shall drive it, for he is more careful, and, besides, it does not cost so much. I have no fear when Ettore drives, and Dobbiaco's horses love him like a brother. And now I shall be able to wear my black shoes with the high heels; for I should have liked the witch to see my respect for her wisdom, only that I could not have walked so far in them. It troubled me, that I must wear my old shoes, but now—The signora is in reality an angel. I have always said it." And 'Vanna, impetuously, and yet with a half-humorous, tender look, which meant "May I? For see, it is no disrespect—I might have been your mother," laid her hands on Theo's shoulders, and kissed her, first on one cheek, then on the other, and then, with a low murmur of affection, full upon the mouth. . . .

[VIII]

There was a long pause following 'Vanna's exit. Then Theo burst out quite suddenly:

"Damn you, Elizabeth! Keep your thoughts to yourself."

"I was!"

"You weren't! I could feel them crawling over me like caterpillars."

"Conscience. May I ask when you're going to tell 'Vanna?"

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Theo ignored the question. "At least we can give her a sewing-machine, before we go," defensively.

The captain muttered: "That's a funny cure for a broken heart!"

" 'Vanna's heart has no *right* to be broken. Do you imagine, perhaps, that in mediæval times, when there were faithful retainers and all that sort of thing, that Sir Knight did not ride off to the Crusades, in case it might upset his devoted swineherd? Or that the Lady Ethelreda gave up all thoughts of marrying from Kent away into Normandy, because she was afraid that she could not take her faithful old nurse with her?"

Elizabeth remarked, airily: "You can't do away with reality by burlesquing it."

"Look here, Elizabeth! Fair and square—do you and Ted actually suggest that Johnny and I ought to regulate our lives on matters of life and death, career and income, everything, by the fact that our servants, whom we like and who like us, might not want us to leave La Collina? Surely it's going a bit too far!"

"Putting it bluffly, what Elizabeth means is this." The captain spoke at last, irritably obedient to a long, pleading look from Elizabeth, which meant to say: It's not fair to let me do all the dirty work. "She means that it isn't desperately urgent for you and Johnny to give up living in Italy, because you're very happy here, and it suits you; and your return

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isn't a desperate matter, because, if Mr. Elworthy Pinkerton hadn't died, it wouldn't even have occurred to you that you wanted to return."

"No, of course not. Big things don't occur to you slowly, like that. They suddenly tumble into the middle of your lives. But that doesn't make them any less urgent."

"What Elizabeth means—" began the captain again.

"Oh, I'm not interested in the result of your plotting."

The captain flushed to the colour of old brick. "That was a—a damnably unfair thing to say, Theo."

But Theo went on recklessly, hurt that they should have been discussing her, and discussing her from an adverse angle.

"Talking and plotting are the same things, in this case. I'll do as I like here, and I won't be hampered. A house is a thing you can get rid of. And I *won't* be hampered by 'Vannas and Ettores; nor because Elizabeth wants Johnny's job for Cyril; nor even because it happens to suit you to come and stay here whenever you like, instead of with Sister Sophia in Chelborough!"

"That settles it!" Edward Locke bit deep into the mouthpiece of his pipe. "I'm off to-morrow!"

Theo made a little gesture of desperation. "There, I've been abominably rude! I hate people who are

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rude; but you all goaded me into it—'Vanna with her kisses; and you and Beth with your heads together, saying how cruel I am, and how unfeeling. I'm not a bit unfeeling, I tell you, but I'm terrified of being done out of my share of the world—as Dad was done out of it, for instance, because he couldn't stand up for himself at the critical moment. . . . There's a form of unselfishness that leads to the lunatic asylum or the workhouse, and it's just because I'm in danger of being a feeble sentimentalist, that I want to go charging through things, whatever it costs me."

Her eloquence broke down. She had been on fire the moment before—Now: "Johnny," she pleaded. "Johnny, don't let them think that—Oh, do help me, Johnny. They're putting it all on me."

"I'm putting it on Johnny," said the captain hastily, for it was a fetish with him that Theo could do no wrong.

Elizabeth, furious that he had not come in wholeheartedly on her side, said in her softest voice: "When we were talking this morning, you said . . ." and having wilfully brought herself to this point, stopped, suggesting that she was on the brink of indiscretion, or even betrayal.

Theo looked at the captain. "Well, Ted?"

He became very excited. "I won't have it. I didn't say a word, not a word that you or Johnny couldn't hear."

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He was terribly ashamed, now, of his lapse into the luscious delights of a partnership in sub-tones with pretty little Elizabeth; though he did remind himself with what insistence they had kept up that running comment of: "Theo's a darling and Johnny's a dear"; almost as though they had been afraid to let it go; almost as though these were supports to which they clung in their delicious moral tipsiness. He hated Elizabeth now; swung right over to Theo's side. Johnny was a brute to bring her to Italy at all, without consulting her; Johnny thought only of himself; and now he had drawn her into this entanglement of servants and houses, he would probably leave her to it, leave her to tell 'Vanna. His reflections, dashing at a headlong pace along this track, found vent now in a blustering:

"I say that, if anyone is to tell 'Vanna to-day, it ought to be Johnny."

"Of course it will be Johnny," said that gentleman, quietly. "What do you imagine? And of course 'Vanna will be told to-day, the minute we get Prince's answer to our wire. It's no good letting 'Vanna know that she and Ettore have got to leave the house, before we know for certain that they have to."

Theo cried: "Oh, *must* you tell her to-day, Johnny? Not to-day!" She caught her breath in apprehension of the look that, spiritually, would

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bruise 'Vanna's face, when the blow smote her. "Can't we just run away?"

"No, we can't!" retorted Johnny. And—

"Coward!" whispered Elizabeth, at the same moment.

—Johnny and Elizabeth together, for the present, against the captain and Theo! This quarrel was taking curious shapes, dividing and re-sorting itself, so that nobody quite knew where they might look for next moment's partisan. And every time 'Vanna or Ettore appeared, pathetically unconscious characters in a play, on some innocent and irrelevant errand of their own, the quarrel, ebbing perforce during their presence, rolled back like a wave . . . and came on like the following wave, with even greater force, the moment the unnecessary characters had withdrawn. There was an odd quality of excitement in the mind of each of the four, wondering how far they dared go; wondering how much unexpected fury and resentment had lain packed away during all these weeks, when they had lived so serenely together, so care-free; when they had, oddest memory of all, appreciated each other so unreservedly.

Theo knew that she had been a coward; but surely it was human to want to run away and avoid a thing? She had had enough of Elizabeth, for the moment . . . and incidentally, Elizabeth had had enough of her.

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"I'm going down to bathe. Who's coming?" remarked Theo in an offhand way.

And almost simultaneously, Elizabeth had risen to her feet, saying: "Well, I'm for a bathe, as I'm not likely to have many more here."

The device to be rid of each other's company for a while, had rather grotesquely failed; and, recognizing it, they both laughed. Johnny and Ted looked at them gravely, wondering how they could. Johnny and Ted were not quite so mobile in their emotions! If they were set and fixed for gloom and quarrelling, they could not suddenly laugh.

"I'm not going to bathe to-day," said Johnny, reproachfully.

"Why ever not?" With a jaunty swing of the shoulders, Theo went off to get her costume.

"I'll meet you at the foot of the path," Elizabeth called after her, in perfect friendliness.

Presently, the two disappeared together, side by side, down the mule-track, Watty and Kim jumping round them with short rejoicing barks.

[IX]

Captain Locke and Johnny now found themselves with the quarrel, so to speak, left on their hands. Women really were amazing: They had no power of

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consistence. Heaven only knew what they were saying now to each other about "men," blaming Johnny, blaming Ted, blaming husbands in general, and Cyril! It really was hardly fair of them, after Johnny and Ted had just arranged themselves, disposed of their sympathies; after Ted had come the whole way over from Elizabeth to Theo, and Johnny was just preparing to have it out with him. . . .

They eyed each other uncertainly. An alliance was surely indicated. Otherwise, what were they to do, during the next days, each with half of a ruptured friendship to brood over alone, while Theo and Elizabeth went about interwined?

"Uprooting is always a rotten business," said Johnny at last. "Makes one short-tempered. I'm not keen on leaving Italy, but I've got to think of Theo and her future."

The captain nodded, immensely relieved that Johnny had dropped his truculence towards him personally.

"Of course Theo comes first," he agreed.

Johnny went on: "If anything should happen to me—well, we can only just live on what we make, out here. I can't save on it. Now, in London, one is on the spot; as well as my salary at Radlett's, I'd probably double my income. I really do hate turning 'Vanna and Ettore adrift, but after all, it's busi-

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ness." His voice was quite unnaturally practical.

"Oh, they'll get another place," the captain agreed. "After all,"—they kept on saying "after all" as though they were not convincing one another, but some impartial and non-existent listener—"After all, they managed to live for about forty years, before you and Theo came along. That was just a bit of luck for them, that you did come along and treated them so well. After all," he added, jocularly, " 'Vanna will get her sewing-machine!"

A pause . . . during which they smoked hard, and felt much better.

"I hope Theo isn't angry with me," mused the captain, rather uneasily.

"Well—you don't mind my saying so, do you? —I think it's a pity you let yourself go to Elizabeth quite so much this morning. That's bound to rile Theo; she says she can always tell when some one has been buttering up Elizabeth, who goes about afterwards as though she were covered with soft little yellow feathers."

"Elizabeth gets round one," the other man admitted, beginning to betray Elizabeth. "She says, you see, that you and Theo are so smugly wrapped up in each other that you don't realize how beastly it is for her not to be able to marry her Cyril."

"She says we're smug, does she?" Johnny pocketed this for future use.

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"Well, after all, they're young, you know, and it's hard on them to be parted like this."

"Parted!" Johnny laughed. "Who's parted them? That's the worst of being a sentimentalist."

"Who says I'm a sentimentalist?"

"Theo, of course," said Johnny, beginning to betray Theo. "She says one can do anything with you, by nestling a little hand into your big horny one, and looking up at you with trustful eyes."

The captain recognized this as the authentic mockbird Theo. It was not in Johnny's style, so obviously Johnny had not made it up. He felt a momentary sick sinking in that part of his affections where Theo had lain. So she made fun of him to other people! Little Theo! They had been such pals. Old man and slip of a girl—she wasn't much more than a girl! But she had liked sitting curled up at his feet, listening to his yarns—*pretended* she had liked it. And now she called him a sentimentalist, which was quite untrue, and—and—and a damned lie! A tough, cynical old sailor, leathery with experience, to be called a sentimentalist, as though he were made out of syrup, golden syrup, sticky golden syrup!

. . . Johnny, watching him fume, said anxiously: "Look here, you'd better not let Theo know that I ever told you what she said."

"Why can't you keep your mouth shut, then," growled the captain. "Elizabeth's quite right when

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she says no secret is safe when you go about the house, pulling at every loose thread you find, to see if the knitting will come unravelled."

"Ah, Elizabeth said that, did she!"

Johnny bit hard on the stem of his pipe. It was obvious that the captain was not inventing the quotation, which was in the true Elizabethan style. And he had rather fancied his pretty little cousin admired him—Ah, well!

"What else did she say about me?" he queried, naïvely. . . .

[x]

In a boat between the shore and the breakwater, Elizabeth was saying, while she lazily watched Theo pulling the oars: "I wonder what Johnny would have been like, without you, Theo?"

"Exactly the same as he is now, I suppose." Theo hated any hints to the effect that she was the managing one of the couple. It made her feel harsh and angular. Spectacularly, she preferred Johnny as master.

"Ted was saying to-day that you had knocked Johnny to pieces, as one breaks up an old ship, using the materials to build it again in the shape one fancies."

"Did Ted say that?" . . . The boat suddenly

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leapt forward at a specially vigorous pull from Theo.

"Oh, he didn't put it so neatly. But he's a loyal old darling, Theo. He does simply adore you. He said that he knew quite well that, in the end, you'd have to manage this whole moving business, getting rid of 'Vanna and Ettore, going to England, and everything. Johnny will bathe up to the last moment, and moon about the garden, and then, quite suddenly, he'll leap to the idea of how jolly it is to be going to be literary manager at Radlett's—Ted says that Johnny is really the most selfish of the two, although he's got a sort of boyish, happy-go-lucky reputation; and you get all the knocks."

Elizabeth, between opal sea and sunset sky, apricot in the west, was mellowed to repent any damage for which she might have been responsible, between Theo and the captain; and was trying, with all her tact and subtlety, to put it right again, without obviously *seeming* to do so. But nothing is so exasperating as to receive commiseration in the spot where you least want it. Theo's pride demanded that people should envy her for her husband, not pity her for him. She was passionately fond of Johnny; and whatever she might have to go through, when he occasionally failed her, was her own affair, and to be hidden from the view of others, not exposed to it. She would far rather that Elizabeth had repeated to her things

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that the captain had said about Johnny's value and resplendence, even if it thereby somewhat tarnished her own. Ted was a traitor, talking against Johnny like that, pretending to be Johnny's friend. She would have it out with him when she got back. Men —she had always heard that decent men hung together in a crisis. She brought up the boat with perfect skill against the stone arches under the breakwater, neither jarring it, nor leaving too wide a gap for them to reach the rope. They tied it up at the bows, and began to undress.

"It was frightfully silly of all of us, quarrelling like that," Theo remarked lightly, knotting a gay-coloured handkerchief round her golden hair. "All very well for men, but you and I ought to have known better. After all, we *can* see when something is funny!"

"Mmmm . . . I know. But I was feeling rather sore about Cyril. I don't imagine, you know, that my wire to Cyril will do much good, because if Mostyn has promised the job to Johnny—well, Johnny gets it. It was just that I felt that I had to do something. I'm not sure that it's Cyril's kind of job, really."

"No. That's what Johnny says. He said if he felt Cyril was really cut out for it, and only wanted this initial push, he'd have told Mostyn straight out to

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give it to him. Johnny's awfully generous, you know. He says Cyril could never have managed the interviewing part of it."

"Why not?" Elizabeth's voice, instead of being warm with gratitude to Johnny for his good intention, was unexpectedly rimed with frost. "Why couldn't Cyril have managed the interviewing part of it?"

Theo posed herself to dive. "Oh, he hasn't the right sort of manner."

She sprang, head bent, cleaving the water; and then slowly, as though a magnet were pulling her up through the clear green, rose to the surface, stiff and slim and straight.

Elizabeth remained sitting on the ledge, swinging her legs. She did not want to bathe just for a moment. To enjoy a dip, you have to have your mind free, and she was preoccupied by what Johnny had said. Had he meant to be patronizing? It was really worse than an open insult, to say that Cyril hadn't the right manner for interviews with the Great, just because Cyril had pushed his own way in the world, and hadn't gone to the sort of school which men like to mention. . . . So Johnny went round saying things like that about poor old Cyril, did he? Never to her! He hadn't dared say them to her; only to Theo, confidentially, up there among the olives. And she and Ted had been so careful to say nothing

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but nice things about Johnny and Theo! Oh, if she had known! But she would have it out with Johnny, when she got back. . . .

[XI]

By the time they were all sitting round the dinner-table, tension had rushed up to fever point again. The belligerents had shifted their alliances; they had not yet had an opportunity to unload indignation, so they sat there, to all appearances a convivial quartet —two men in evening dress, two women in soft, cool silks, and with bare necks and arms. None of them ate very much, probably because of the weight of suppressed feeling which burdened their tongues, and tightened their throats. Thunderstorm weather. . . .

During the soup, they were painfully polite. 'Vanna herself hung about the doorway, while Marietta handed round the fish. The signori were fond of calamaretti, which were baby octopi, their tentacles fried to a crisp brown; and it was not often that Ettore was able to procure them. The captain refused them. Theo, seeing 'Vanna's face clouded with childish disappointment, pressed them on him, at the same time saying in English:

"She's watching us from the doorway, so do pretend—even if you don't like them."

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"How the deuce can I pretend to eat, if I'm not eating?" he retorted testily. "I've told you I don't want any—I don't want any dinner at all!" He pushed back his plate, and growled out a request to smoke.

'Vanna crept back into the kitchen.

"She's hurt," said Theo. "I think you were rather a beast, Ted."

"I thought I was a damfool sentimentalist," he growled back.

It was like a sudden gap in a wall, out of tension into declared antagonism. Theo darted through, Elizabeth after her, Johnny last!

"If you are a sentimentalist, you might use the quality for once in a good cause, to avoid hurting 'Vanna's feelings."

Then Elizabeth: "After all, Theo, why protect 'Vanna from a prick with a needle, just when you're going to stab her with a sword? That's sentimentalism, if you like!"

And Johnny: "I wonder if any couple has ever been so badgered and persecuted and taunted, just because they give their servants notice? I'm sick of it, and I don't want to hear another word about it! Directly I hear from the Princes for certain, which ought to be any moment now,"—they all looked apprehensively at the door which led into the hall, and

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the front-door—"I shall tell 'Vanna that Theo and I are returning to England on business grounds, and that's the end of it!"

Elizabeth asked him, musingly: "Do you think you have quite the right . . . manner for the interview, Johnny dear?"

Theo frowned. She had not thought Elizabeth would betray her own betrayal of what Johnny had said about Cyril, so quickly. Elizabeth was not to be trusted; she always swerved aside just whenever it suited her, from temporary loyalty. Was it Elizabeth who had told the captain that she, Theo, considered him a sentimentalist? He had glared at her, when he said the word, as though he could have struck her—and up till now, she had been his "little favourite" and his angel who could do no wrong.

Johnny looked helplessly at Elizabeth, suspecting a trap, but not quite able to locate it:

" 'Right manner' for the interview? One doesn't have to have a 'manner,' does one, for interviewing servants?"

"Only for interviewing the Literary Great! Poor Cyril! . . . Well, perhaps he'll learn some day, especially if you take him by the hand, and teach him nicely. You've had so many advantages, you see!"

"I don't know about that," retorted Johnny. "What I *do* know is that you've been going round

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saying that no secret is safe with me in the house. If you feel like that about it, I wonder you've bothered to tell me quite so many—or that I've bothered to keep them?".

"I don't suppose you have," laughed Elizabeth, but flushing, and pulling her bread to bits with quick nervous fingers. "I seem to have seen odd and unaccountable ends of them lying about. After all, Johnny, you know you simply can't resist putting on a certain rather manly, trustable face, and taking someone's arm, and saying in a manly, trustable voice, to match the face: 'Tell me all about it, old thing.' . . . And then—why, we do, you know, to our cost! Confidences are better than marbles to play with, for small boys; such fun, jingling them in your pocket, and caressing them, and now and then giving some other favoured person just a peep . . ."

Because this hit off Johnny's wonted methods with perfect exactitude, not even Theo flared up in his defence. Instead of this, she went off in an oblique direction, and turned on the captain, on whose lips a whimsical grin proved that he quite enjoyed hearing Johnny burlesqued. She said:

"By the way, Ted, I would rather, if you don't mind, that you didn't go about, saying that I am a domineering woman, and Johnny a weakling, and that I can make him do whatever I like. The picture makes us both look rather fools, doesn't it?"

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"I haven't said that," in sheer amazement. "I've never said anything but good of you and Johnny. What do you take me for?"

"Elizabeth told me. As everybody seems to be letting out what everybody else has said, I may as well get my whack in, and be quick about it."

"Elizabeth has made up a lot of lies, then," growled Captain Locke, genuinely not recognizing anything he had said, by the time it had passed through Elizabeth's editing, and then Theo's.

The looks that were now creeping round from one of the four to another, were filled with distrust and suspicion. . . . In one day, their happy-go-lucky liking for each other had been completely shattered. Apparently all firm ground was slippery; all affection hypocrisy; all confidences like feathers left in a draught. And what were they to do, compelled for courtesy's sake, and by convention and habit, to go on sitting round the same table for at least the next half-hour, and probably for the next week, or two weeks, or three? It was worse than eating with strangers, to eat with those who had been friends. What were they to do about it? If only one among them had not been involved, had neither betrayed nor been betrayed, that one might have taken command of the situation. And what was to be pulled out next, in the general unravelling? . . .

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[XII]

'Vanna, in the kitchen, was singing while she dished up the vegetable course of zucchini. The signora liked them; the signora would probably help herself three times, thus consoling 'Vanna for the captain's cold neglect of fish. So she sang, funnily enough, the Italian version of "Chon Kina," that old ditty out of "The Geisha." It had drifted so far south as this. 'Vanna had picked it up in the streets of Turin, when she was a young girl. The four in the dining-room were glad to hear her singing. It filled in the hollow silence, painted blackness with a warm colour—darling 'Vanna! . . . Which brought them right back again, in their thoughts, to the beginning of the whole day's wrangle. Darling 'Vanna, and kind, fat, comic but competent Ettore! It would be better, in a way, when they *had* been told, when the quartet would be spared the irony of their unconscious joviality—"Chon Kina" and the rest of it. Better even, when 'Vanna should go about with a drawn face, lines of pain round her mouth, dark brown shadows under her eyes, dragging as though her feet were heavy. And Ettore—how would Ettore take bad news? Would he still be able to say "Patience" . . .

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[XIII]

. . . "Elizabeth has made up a lot of lies, then," growled the captain.

"Lies?" cried Elizabeth; stopped . . .

. . . And went on. But during that pause, the movement of anger had quickened round the table; ceased altogether to be a civilized matter of alliances and cautious betrayals and subtle cat-like insinuations. Direct and primitive quarrelling, now. Words flung like rocks, now—that was Johnny's way; words flung heavily, to hurt. A quick pelt and scatter of hail . . . from Theo; white hail; hard hail. Rumble of thunder, straight overhead—for the captain, too, had lost control. And Elizabeth supplied the brilliant pats of summer lightning. Summer lightning, pretty and playful to watch, no noise . . . yet, somehow, you are less afraid of hail, of thunder, of the tumbling rocks.

[XIV]

If 'Vanna, singing in the kitchen, had been told: "'Vanna, c'é temporale—there is a thunderstorm," she would have replied: "But no, no, no, no, no! To-night is a full moon like a copper saucepan—and

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see, it floats out of the sea into a clear sky. How wonderful is nature . . ."

[xv]

—How wonderful is nature, even round a dining-room table.

". . . *Lies?* I do despise a man who propitiates."

"Who's propitiating?"

"Ted. Propitiating you. He always does. It makes me feel sick."

"Try and be polite to my guests in my house, please,—if you want to remain one of them?"

"I don't."

"Nobody is pressing you to stay. Nobody wants a mischief-maker in the home."

A quarrel is apt to make four different people very like the same person.

Any one of the quartet might have been saying any one of these short, angrily stammered speeches; hunting round to cap the last; barely listening to the sense; resenting only the tone; picking up a word here and there. . . .

"Cad, Johnny, cad! You're not the sort of people who ought ever to have visitors, you and Theo. You're savages, really. Oh, I wish, I *do* wish I'd never come here."

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. . . "You needn't bother about *that*," Theo threw in, scornfully, noting that the sentimental captain was showing signs of guilty disturbance at Elizabeth's unexpected burst of weeping. "We can be just as beastly and pepper-tempered while we're crying, as before. Beth is simply having a shot to reach your charming old-world chivalry."

"—No wonder you get yourself hated, Theo, lashing about with your tongue. Can't you leave the poor kid in peace? She's alone against the lot of us."

Theo thought that the protagonist who was alone, did always, for that pathetic reason, end by being the least alone. Nevertheless she remained silent, for she could never answer Johnny with the same cool teasing disdain with which she answered the others . . . especially when she saw him capitulate to the tears intended by Elizabeth to subdue the captain.

"No one hates Theo," shouted the captain; "most popular woman I know. You're jealous of her popularity. That's why—that's why you got her out of England."

"Is that why I'm taking her back, too?"

Elizabeth whispered: "She's taking *you* back, isn't she?"

"Damn you, Beth—shut up! shut up! . . . That eternal hinting. . . . Who, in God's name, then, *is* the very different girl, sweet-tempered and yielding, who—"

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"—Might have made Johnny seem a strong strong man? Not you, Theo—"

"—Nor you."

"Beth? Men don't like Beth!" Johnny lunged out, unpardonably—'Vanna had once said of him: "The Signore is one that has no weights upon his tongue!"

His pretty little cousin was incoherent now, and whimpering with rage and nervous misery: "*You did*—when you—years ago. But you were too easily . . . Oh, deny it now . . . *Theo* likes easy jobs!"

"Well, damn it, young Pinkerton doesn't seem in much of a hurry," Ted Locke was still clumsily defending Theo. But with no use for an ally who went too far, and who drove at a side-issue, she turned on him with the same rending whirl and spit and stiffening fur, as a furious kitten: "How many times am I to tell you—you must be mad—I *won't* have this damnable rudeness to my guests at my table. Just apologize to Beth, will you?"

"It wasn't Ted at all—don't be a fool, Theo. . . . Can't you see?—Johnny—Johnny said that men didn't . . . As though I'd tried—with Cyril!"

"I didn't mean—in the way you twist it, now . . ."

"As though I'd *had* to try! He said it to humiliate me . . . —oh, treading on me, to impress you!"

"Ted—"

"What does Ted matter? He's been jealous of

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Johnny from the beginning. Johnny's young, and he's got you and can't appreciate you; Ted told me so, in confidence—Yes, I'll break what I like, now," Elizabeth finished recklessly; her wet defiant eyes laughed in abandonment to the final pleasures of breaking faith.

Johnny Morgan and his friend, Edward Locke, both stood up, as though the quarrel had passed to a stage of danger beyond sitting and saying things. Another pause . . . again and each time it had been Elizabeth who had led them from one stage on to the next.

. . . Theo then said, very softly and deliberately: "Even if you have minded our happiness, or any couple's happiness, all this time, Elizabeth . . . don't show it, *please*. I can't bear you to show it to them."

—Was it a genuine plea, from woman whose secret it is that at the ultimate crisis her instincts send her to stand by woman? Or was it the individual Theo saving her individual Johnny from hearing those few things that a man must not know about himself, if he is to live with his mind at peace?

. . . Elizabeth, uncertain whether a hand or a dagger-thrust had been offered her, sprang up, too, facing Theo, who alone of the quartet remained in her seat; a steady little smile upon her lips. . . .

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[XVI]

—A loud knocking at the front-door! Theo started, and dropped her glass—a very precious Venetian glass that she was sorry to see broken on the red and white tiles—and, at the same moment, she remembered with a pang, as one does remember these little things when they are likely to hurt most, how they had been trying for months to smash accidentally a hideous sugar-basin in bright blue glass, which Ettore and 'Vanna, with triumphant bad taste, had bought on their behalf; and how every time Ted or Johnny had raised it aloft, meaning to dash it down and pretend to an accident, their nerve had failed them at the last moment, and they had cravenly replaced it on the table. This had been one of the absurd jokes which had united them—when they were still good friends. While now . . . Here was the telegram, the telegram from Stanton Prince, no doubt, saying that he would buy the house.

Yes, a telegram! 'Vanna brought it in, and waited about for the usual lira to be given to the small child who had carried it up from the post-office. Johnny, scowling at nothing in particular, fished out a two-lire piece, and absently handed it to her. 'Vanna began to argue from the thrifty point of view:

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"It is not right, signore, for the sake of the others who have telegrams brought to them, and from whom now will also be expected two lire, when perhaps *they* cannot afford it."

"Perhaps *I* can't," snapped Johnny. "Never mind all that now. Give it to the ragazzo and send him away—and then come back here, 'Vanna. I may have something to tell you."

"A nice surprise for the cook?" asked 'Vanna, laughing; "Does the signore still say that cooks can be had two for a soldi?"—And this also was one of the stock jokes of their daily life, up at Collina.

'Vanna went off, and was heard sternly demanding change of the very small boy with the brown face and wonderful silky eye-lashes, who had brought up the telegram.

The telegram which Johnny still held in his hand, and stared at as though it were alive and he hated it. . . .

"Oh, please hurry, Johnny!" whispered Theo, half under her breath. She felt as though she were caught in the moment, as a fly is caught in a sticky web; and that she would never escape from it. But it was ridiculous, of course, it was perfectly ridiculous that the mere fact that Johnny should be offered an excellent job, and therefore meant to sell his house

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to friends, who would give him an excellent price, should be making them all so utterly panic-stricken. After the terrific bout of "each for himself," which they had been enjoying all day, now while this moment held them tense, now, not one was an opportunist. They were all four thinking of 'Vanna. . . .

She came back into the dining-room, and waited, expectant of the news that the padrone had promised her, albeit she was somewhat surprised to see the cream-coloured envelope still unopened in his hand. Triumphantly, she laid the lira on the tablecloth before him.

"I have saved you this," she crowed, exulting with innocent conceit in the great use she was to the signore. After all, a lira saved is a lira gained. She had forgotten her agonies over a certain three thousand lire, almost a year ago that day. "Ecco!" she exclaimed. "Put that back in your pocket, signore, and buy something beautiful for your signora."

He looked at her in vague perplexity, not quite understanding what she said, nor why she thrust a nickel coin upon him. . . .

"Wait a minute, 'Vanna," repeating himself, as though he had not said it three minutes ago. "I may have something to tell you!" And ferociously he tore apart the envelope, read the telegram. . . .

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The other three were intent upon his face. They watched his brows draw together . . . then a sudden radiant grin broke through his gloom; he shrugged his shoulders—an Italian habit he had picked up—and handed the telegram across to Theo.

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PART III

EACH FOR HIMSELF—

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[1]

MISS SOPHIA LOCKE was leading a double life.

The statement is disreputable, but explanation will throw a softer light upon it. In Chelborough, in her small neat house, she was a perfectly ordinary specimen of the better type of up-to-date maiden lady. True, her hair was startlingly silver, instead of merely streaked and faded, but otherwise there were no deviations from the normal. She was particular about the way her rooms were dusted; punctually attended every meeting of the Domesticity Institute; rejected gossip, but accepted speculation as to the doings of her neighbours; talked firmly but tolerantly to her two maids, Gwen and Daisy, on the dubitable trustworthiness of fellows; and even kept a cat and cherished it . . . though this may have been a lightly ironic concession to what tradition expected of her.

She did not do wool-work, nor keep an autograph album, because she was an old maid of this century, and not of the last; and old maids of this century take an interest in literature and progress and art—

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up to a certain point: the Heal-cretonne-and-natural-oak point. Their own morals are excellent, but they do not swoon when they hear that a village girl may be about to have an illegitimate child; on the contrary, they are fully capable of deciding what is best to be done. The air about them is a little cool and arid, and they do not court the curate.

Thus the old maids of this generation, of whom Miss Sophia Locke, in the eyes of Chelborough, was a creditable specimen.

The double life began when her hair lost, or rather, gained its colour. It was a late blooming. No one could have known that, at the age of forty-three or thereabouts, she would be crowned with that glorious sheen of crisp silver. As a young girl, she had been quite plain, with a thin brown face and a rather haughty nose. Later on, her friends began to say to her: "Isn't it rather a pity about your hair, Sophia dear? I mean, you are very young to turn grey so early, and it isn't as if you had any troubles. We are not old-fashioned these days, you know, so why don't you use—no, it isn't a dye, just brings back the original tint; pumps life into the roots, I think . . ." the vague recommendation trailed on. Sophia smiled and shrugged her shoulders. She knew her hair was not turning grey. It was turning silver, the colour of a sword, of moonlight. Then, one day, she accidentally caught sight of herself in the mirror—

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which is a very different thing from deliberately and rigidly setting yourself in front of the mirror to put on your hat. For an unexpected encounter may show you a stranger. It showed Sophia Locke strangely attractive; not good-looking, but proud as an empress might be; bewitching as Messalina, Lucrezia, Sarah Bernhardt, and all those others whom age could not stale.

And with the discovery, queer empress longings began to stir in her: desire to be a power in the land, to influence men, to be remembered hereafter as a brilliant witty woman, a wonderful woman of the Brocade period, a woman with a dark face and silver hair, who had only to let fall a word to be sure of obedience to her royalty. Her longings were not at all amorous, and she easily escaped silliness by the control in which she held them. But she began to lead a double life. In Chelborough she was still Miss Sophia, Miss Locke, a thoroughly nice, helpful and unremarkable woman. But she went up very frequently to London, and there she wore sombre expensive clothes with a distinguished cut to them. She was seen at restaurants; and she knew men, three or four old friends, one or two of them ready to become admirers; and they developed into a Circle. To them, she was—well, not exactly their inspiration nor their intellectual Egeria; and certainly not their mistress; nothing so tough nor commonplace as a "damn

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fine woman"—but a creature, fine, nevertheless, and full of stimulation and understanding. And now and then she pulled a string, and a puppet rose and a puppet fell at the end of the string, and she thrilled to believe that the world was at the end of the string, and that she had moved it. . . .

Her favourite word, but she only used it to herself, for one must not be silly—she was stern with all silliness!—the favourite word of this romantic woman was "enchantress."

And one dread menaced her life, swung above her days on a single filament drawn from a cobweb; the dread that her brother Edward would come and live with her.

She was very fond of Edward. Because he was two years her junior, and a bit of a scapegrace, her parents had both of them, on dying, extracted promises from her that she would look after Edward. So that if he came to live with her—and he might do so at any moment—she could not conscientiously escape. Edward had rioted through nearly all his money except the pension he received on being invalided out of the Navy, eighteen months ago. She, on the other hand, had not touched her capital, and that was another reason why she could not refuse Edward, should he come to live with her.

And he might do so at any moment. There was no other member of the family with whom he could live.

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He had neither the health nor the means nor the stability of character to live alone. Fortunately he had friends, John and Theo Morgan, and was living with them in Italy. A very happy arrangement. Miss Sophia, without wantonly being a hypocrite, could use inflections of real pain and wistfulness when she mentioned, in Chelborough, her only brother; and how devoted they were to each other; and how they were the only ones left; and how sad it was that they should be separated, formerly because he had chosen the Navy for his profession, and lately had found himself so much better in a sunny climate than in foggy England. "My brother in Italy" or "my brother at sea" was a glorified being, tender, affectionate, sunburnt; quizzical dashed with wickedness . . . whom one could really contrive to miss, and to miss poignantly. But Sophia Locke knew that "my brother in the sitting-room," "my brother in the bathroom" would lose all such attraction. His loafing, blundering, swearing reality would come tearing and crashing through the thin tissue of glamour she had succeeded in weaving about his absence.

And, worse than all the ash on the sitting-room carpet, worse than all the bellowings for his boots, and splashings in hot water just when Gwen wanted to come in and polish the taps, worst of all was the certain and instinctive knowledge that he would break through her pose.

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Sophia was aware that Edward had never found her alluring, and would notice no difference in her now; he would look at her with that devastatingly brotherly eye which wonders what on earth anyone can see in Sophia, even though she's such a good old sort! Even the silver hair would merely be to him hair that had ceased to be black any more; and her slow mellow quality of enchantress would wither under his blank disbelief in it, wither and die. Thus she would pull no more strings with that gay confident touch which came from believing that the world was tied to the end of them. Thus she would become Miss Sophia of Chelborough; not a wonderful woman, but dull; nervous and irritable, because Edward talked too familiarly with the servants, or used strong tobacco.

It was all right, quite all right, while Edward kept away: "Yes, it *is* so sad, isn't it, having one's only brother in Italy?" . . .

[II]

"Miss Locke's going up to London again," said one worthy lady of Chelborough to another, meeting where the motor-buses started on their route from Chelborough to Uxley.

"Fancy," replied the other; "she's always going up to London, isn't she? She says it's to see her

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solicitor; buying and selling, I suppose; one must keep an eye on them; my husband says so, too; I leave it all to him. But it does seem a pity, doesn't it, to leave the country in June with this lovely weather?"

Yet another lady from Chelborough, Sophia met in the first-class compartment on her way to town. Mrs. Croft was very bothered, apparently, about her eldest son, who was the editor of a small cultured magazine without readers. A magazine without readers is bound by the laws of nature to cease to exist in a short space of time; and Mrs. Croft was wondering just what her son would do then.

"He is so dreadfully clever," she remarked; "really, sometimes I almost wish he were more ordinary. We ordinary people do seem to have the best of it, don't we, Miss Locke?"

Sophia acquiesced; smiled . . . and caressed her secret life.

"I might be able to arrange something for your son," she hinted, carelessly, "I know one or two people with influence in literary circles."

. . . Pulling strings! Pulling strings! whispered an ecstatic voice from the Brocade Period. . . .

Mrs. Croft thanked her politely, but, Miss Locke saw, with entire disbelief of any profitable fruition from the offer. Dear Miss Locke, such a nice woman, so helpful at arranging any sort of charity!

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Dear Miss Locke!—and never poor Miss Locke; that, at least, was spared her; but Chelborough did not see, Chelborough had no vision of the enchantress in its midst. It was not likely, therefore, that dear Miss Locke could do anything towards getting a grown man a full-sized job, though it was kind of her to say she would try; dear Miss Locke was always kind. How funny, though, that her hair had turned white before she was fifty; it made her look so much older, did it not?

So much for the vision of Chelborough and its inhabitants, who, if they had risen early enough on a sparkling morning of late autumn, might have seen the grass a-tingle and a-flash with just that brittle silver which frosted Sophia's hair, and had touched with magic all her secret life.

When she alighted from the railway carriage, at Victoria, she moved already with that gracious disdainful air which was part of the unreal yet triumphantly real personality into which, nowadays, she could slip with the same satisfied sigh as a beggar-maid into a coat of ermine. She did a little expensive shopping—Sophia lived simply in Chelborough, so that she might be luxurious in London; then she telephoned an elderly friend of hers, who had once been in the Diplomatic Service, and whose manner, therefore, still retained that suave and courteous affability which gave an impression of concealing its

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true object, even when there was no object to conceal! She merely told him that she was in town, confidently leaving the rest to him. He knew her favourite restaurant, and guessed by instinct the play she wanted to see. "Lunch and matinée? or dinner, and perhaps supper after the play? . . . Really? you can spare—you can enrich me with a whole evening?" —They discussed whether they should add to their party, or leave it a duet; finally:

"If you could tell me anyone, dear Sophia Locke, to sit on my left, to whom I could turn with any pleasure while you are on my right, name her, or for ever hold your peace."

Sophia answered with an epigram which was good enough for the retired diplomat to repeat that day at lunch to any crony who could be trusted to appreciate it. And the certainty of this was enough to lend a zest to her own lunch with—she hesitated as to which other of her court should be summoned; then rang up Mr. Ambrose Percival Radlett.

"Take me out to lunch," she said, imperially.

[III]

It is a curious comment on the defects of a brother's perception, that whereas Captain Edward Locke, late of the King's Navy, would, without hesitation, have taken Sophia to some little three-and-sixpenny Soho

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place, ignorant that a sister's aspirations could soar higher or wider than this limit, yet Ambrose Radlett, with absolute conviction, thought one could not possibly have the honour of escorting Miss Sophia Locke (of all people!) to lunch, except at the most exclusive and distinguished paradise of epicures.

Mr. Radlett was senior partner in the publishing firm of Messrs. Radlett and Mostyn. He did not superintend much of the firm's business nowadays, because the junior partner, Mostyn, was an enterprising and vigorous person, and needed no aid. "Young blood" was the benevolent phrase with which Mr. Radlett characterized his junior partner; "dug-out" was the epithet by which Bertie Mostyn briefly dismissed his senior partner. Mostyn's way of keeping Mr. Radlett out of active interference was so simple as to be almost sublime; it consisted of moving the partners' private office, where all important affairs were transacted, further and further towards the top of the building. He was on the fourth floor, by now. Mr. Radlett had a stiff leg, and the lift was frequently out of order; when it was not, and the matter was really urgent, Mostyn put it out of order. Of recent years, this became unnecessary, for Mr. Radlett showed very little interest in publishing, but liked going about, being seen about; liked good scandal and good wine, and liked the ladies, God bless 'em! He invariably spoke of

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women as "the ladies"; he had all sorts of illusions about "the ladies" which had very little to do with women, and these illusions he guarded with the drawn sword of chivalry, quite unaware that the fortress behind him had long since fallen in ruins to the ground. The ladies were helpless, and the ladies were timid, and the ladies, God bless 'em, were chaste. Miss Sophia Locke rather relished the old-fashioned flavour of his talk; it appealed to her sense of mockery, which was keen, to watch his flourishes with the sword of chivalry. But he was a good-looking old man, tall and thin, with a dyed military moustache. In spite of his limp, he wore his clothes well. As for his compliments, she found them quite delectable, for he marshalled them beforehand as a general marshals his troops, and when delivered they smote her heavily as a mediæval bombardment. She need never ponder over a compliment of Radlett's, wondering quite what he had meant by it, wondering whether it held a concealed reversal, as she did with her friend the diplomat, for instance. Mr. Radlett was not inscrutable, and when he told his lovely ladies they were lovely, then, by Jove, he told 'em!

To-day, Sophia noticed at once that her escort was entirely clothed in slightly complacent black, worn with that emphatic air of having put on his tie for an Occasion.

"Funeral?" she queried, with a lift of her slender

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dark eyebrows. "Then ought you to be lunching out?"

"Could I refuse?" And he added: "Yes, poor fellow; Pinkerton, good old Elworthy Pinkerton, our literary manager; died of pneumonia. One had to be there, you know; his widow, and all that; son, too. I could have sent Mostyn to represent me, but I said to myself, 'no, Pinkerton's been in the office for thirty-one years; there is nothing much I can do for him now, but I *can* do this: I can stand by his grave and say 'Ave atque vale!' "

"There was quite a choice of other things you might have said," suggested Miss Sophia, in her silken fashion; "you might have said, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant,' or 'Nunc dimitis,' or 'R.I.P.' or"—pause—" 'Hohenlinden' . . ."

Mr. Radlett signed for the wine-list to be brought to him.

"Oh, I don't think I could really have said anything more," he countered, heavily; "it would not have looked well, especially as the parson was speaking. Chablis, Sophia? Or shall we have a bottle of Chateau Yquem? Too sweet? Then we'll have it with the dessert, and a light dry wine, now Monbrachet."

"Thirty-one years is a long time to have the same man in your office. What would you have done if he had not happened to die at last? Left him on his stool till he mummified?"

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"Well, you know," said Mr. Radlett, leaning towards her confidentially, "in a way, I wasn't sorry for this. I mean, I saw Mostyn would soon have him out, y'know. Mostyn's young blood, and he's all *for* young blood; it would have hurt old Pinkerton, poor old chap, if he'd been given the sack to make room for young blood; and now he'll never know and I'm glad of it!"—He was a kind soul, this Ambrose Radlett!—"Glad of it," he repeated. "Pinkerton never missed a day at the office for twenty-five years; half-past nine sharp every morning; it was his one great ambition, he told me, to make this record; that was, when he had been at it for about twelve years. Well, he did it; the office clubbed together for a presentation on the anniversary of the twenty-five years. But after that, he began to slack off a bit."

Sophia's intuition gave an understanding nod towards the absent—the necessarily absent—Mr. Pinkerton. "Yes, of course he would; the record was made, and there was nothing but blankness ahead. He might have tried for a fifty-year record, of course . . ."

"'Fraid Mostyn wouldn't have let him, y'know. 'Fraid Mostyn would have turned him out. Determined chap, Mostyn. . . . Young blood! He said something to me on the morning when we gave Pinkerton the testimonial and the timepiece; something

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about not being able to run a modern publishing firm on punctuality and integrity alone. . . . Pinkerton didn't hear; Pinkerton thought up to the last that we valued his services. So I did, very highly; only Mostyn—You look simply splendid in black and white, Sophia; I'd always dress you in black and white."

"You would never dress me in anything," replied Sophia, coolly. "I should dress myself; or Molyneux or Poiret might dress me—but never you, Ambrose. You still believe that the waist comes half-way down, don't you?"

Mr. Radlett said something gallant and inevitable in connection with waists; Sophia let it go lurching past, as one stands for a moment at the kerb-stone before crossing the road, when a heavy dray is approaching. She spoke a trifle impatiently:

"But surely you could have safeguarded Pinkerton's place in the office until his hundredth birthday, if you had wanted to; Mostyn is only your junior partner."

"Oh well, most of the work falls on him, you know; I'm what they call a sleeping partner, more or less"; and then, very slowly, he began to make a joke: "not that *you* are likely to catch me napping, Sophia. Asleep inside the office, but damned wide-awake when there are lovely ladies about." And he laughed and laughed and laughed. . . .

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Sophia watched him gravely; this was one of the moments when she contemplated excluding him from her circle. Within the next few minutes, however, she rapidly changed her mind.

"As a matter of fact," Mr. Radlett went on, recovering himself, "I was saying very much the same thing to young Pinkerton this morning—funny time for him to approach me on business; heartless, I thought it, straight on top of his father's funeral; lack of propriety, as well as lack of heart; there was I, with the tears in my eyes, and there was he, trying to wheedle me into saying he could have the job as our literary manager."

"Did you tell him it wasn't hereditary?" asked Sophia, idly.

They had reached the dessert stage by now, and she was savouring that subtle fragrance of muscatel grapes which is diffused through your whole being after each sip of Chateau Yquem.

"I didn't tell him that, no; I just told him what I told you, that I'm more or less of a sleeping partner, and Mostyn is the man to whom he should apply. I expect I showed him rather plainly what I thought of him for being in such an indecent hustle about it. He said, 'Well, but I thought you were really the power behind the throne, sir.' And I am, in a way," said Mr. Radlett, hastily. "But in this case it didn't matter much whom they appointed; as a matter of

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fact, I believe Mostyn's promised the job to Johnny Morgan; you know Morgan, don't you?"

. . . Sophia put down her glass with a quick shaky gesture that spilt some of the pale gold fluid over her hand and over the table-cloth. That was the slovenly kind of thing she hated doing, as a rule, but she had reason to shake. At all times swift at linking cause and effect, her thoughts now sprang straight from the offer of this promising job to Johnny Morgan, successively to the return of Johnny Morgan and his wife to England, to a brother without a home in Italy, to a brother returning to Chelborough to live with her. . . . And like the roar of waters rushing away, leaving the river-bed dry, she saw all this life, the secret life of the enchantress, so sweet to her, rushing, rushing away . . . while, from sheer persistent force of suggestion in the house, she became that thing which Edward accepted as herself—an old maid, a plain old maid, a quiet old maid. His certainty would sap her confidence in the unreal part of her; the part that had been created by a sudden glimpse in her mirror of a woman of strange and gracious beauty with a crown of silver hair, who could exist in the world alternately with Miss Sophia Locke of Chelborough. Edward had preconceived notions, old-fashioned notions; an old maid was to him a woman too unattractive, too little flesh and blood, to have been asked in marriage; and all the transient

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tints and glamours and fabrics that built up the trembling loveliness of her ivory and peacock world, wherein power flashed brilliantly as the shaking fire shut in an opal of a marquise ring pointing up the long slender figure of a woman with hands that were eternally young . . . all this would die, and lose the light, and fade away.

Then, suddenly, Sophia's instinct of self-preservation leaped up; preservation of that unreal self dearer to her and better worth fighting for than any solid objects of house and garden, standards of respectability, household order, and rigidity seemly to her years and station. If hers had been a flushed and ardent girlhood, if fate had been lavish then, twenty and thirty years ago, with the warm thrills allowed to her only of late, she would, perhaps, not have desired quite so strongly that things must happen now as she chose to make them happen. "And if fate has gone back on me again . . ."—if the death of Elworthy Pinkerton were summoning Johnny Morgan to England, breaking up his home in Italy, then, with every act of witchcraft possessed by Sophia Locke, enchantress, she would spin him back again, and set him once more in that villa among the olive terraces sloping down to the sea. . . .

"I wish," she said—and stopped, wilfully allowing her eyes to become inscrutable, as they rested upon

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the small jaunty moustache and slothful chin of Ambrose Radlett. He responded, of course, as all men respond to "I wish," sure that the wish must be flatteringly connected with themselves.

"What do you wish, Sophia?" modulating his voice to tenderness.

"Nothing that you can buy in Bond Street," she retorted, laughing.

Better and better, according to Mr. Radlett; she desired, then, some abstract gift that lay in his power to bestow.

"I wish," said Sophia, again, "that they need not think, in your office and in your profession, that you are just a nonentity. I *hate* the phrase 'sleeping partner'! It makes me see someone rather fat, with a night-cap, his head on a great soft pillow, breathing heavily; now . . . you are not a bit like that."

"I should hope not," burst forth Mr. Radlett in humorous indignation; "night-cap, indeed! with a tassel on it, I shouldn't be surprised."

"Sleeping partner," repeated Sophia, provocatively, as though her disdain lifted the phrase up for his shamed inspection . . . and dropped it again. "Sleeping partner! why sleeping, Ambrose? You used to be head of the firm!"

"I'm head of the firm still."

"No, no, Mostyn is; young blood, you know."

"Damn it, Sophia, you're laughing at me! Have

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some grapes? Have a green Chartreuse?" Cunningly he tried to awaken the gourmet in her, and so swerve from the perilous subject. "Pity they can't invent a new liqueur; there's some stuff I drank in Hungary, Sliwowitz they called it, or some such name; wonderful liqueur, tasted of the plum, upon my word, pure plum; I brought back a bottle with me, and whether they gave me the wrong stuff, or travelling doesn't agree with it, but it tasted to me, over here, more like shampoo, and strong shampoo, mind you."

But Sophia took as little notice of his reminiscences, as previously of his compliments. The fear of her isolation shattered by the return of her only brother to live with her, incited her to use subtle arts with Ambrose Radlett, who distinctly, under other circumstances, was not worth any arts at all.

"What a sensation it would cause," Sophia murmured, nonchalance veiling the wicked intent of her words, "if you were quite suddenly to behave—Napoleonically. It would be even more effective now, after your long and cosy slumbers, than if you had been all along, the firm's Napoleon."

Ambrose Radlett, not unwillingly, surveyed the spectacle of himself as Napoleon. It was rather impossible to disassociate the picture from a certain shape of cocked hat. . . . "D'you mean blustering in and giving orders, upsetting things, and always

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being at the office, with an enormous mail every day, and rows with Mostyn, and sacking half the staff, and sending out messenger boys?" he declared, trying, also in self-preservation, to make her suggestion look a trifle ridiculous.

"Confusion of metaphors," she murmured; "your picture is of an American business magnate in a three-reel film. Quite different from Napoleon. I just meant that it might be amusing if Mostyn were suddenly to realize that you had allowed him to dominate, out of your wilful laziness, not out of your flabbiness; and that even now when you choose, your word—*goes*. Over this affair of Pinkerton's successor, for instance."

"There's nothing wrong with Johnny Morgan," put in Mr. Radlett, but his objection was feeble, for the word "flabbiness" had stung. An unpleasant word: "flabby!" . . . It made you see pale puddings flopping over sideways in a dish.

"Nothing wrong with him, only—he wasn't your choice. It's quite possible that *you* may have decided to give Pinkerton's son a chance; he, at any rate, showed clearly a sort of instinctive right feeling in approaching you instead of Mostyn."

Mr. Radlett began to like young Pinkerton.

"But," Sophia finished the subject, and dismissed it, "of course, you can't do anything now, because the junior partner has already made his own selection.

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The coffee here isn't as good as it used to be, Ambrose; your should speak to Ventroni about it."

[IV]

Ambrose Radlett went straight from that lunch to his club, and sent off a telegram to young Pinkerton, which was extremely curt and Napoleonic in its contents.

Mostyn would certainly be surprised. He chuckled at the thought of Mostyn's surprise, when hearing, perhaps from young Pinkerton himself, that he was henceforth to be literary manager at Radlett and Mostyn's. . . . "But really, Pinkerton, I have heard nothing about this!" "*Mr. Radlett* offered me the post, sir."

Ambrose Radlett chuckled again. . . . Then he decided to go to the office at tea-time, and have a talk with Mostyn. Fairer to Mostyn, to hear of any changes from headquarters first of all. But Mostyn must learn to understand that he could not put his own favourites into any vacancy without the senior partner's sanction and approval.

Really, Sophia was a wonderful woman; she stimulated a man; a man got settled into habits, middle-aged habits—Mr. Radlett was one of those people to whom it never occurred that the "middle" age between birth and three-score-years-and-ten was

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thirty-five!—and without nagging or scolding she simply showed you what you had it in you to *do*. She did not flatter a man, either; he, Ambrose Radlett, was not the type to be deluded by flattery. But it was worth while winning the respect of a woman like Sophia. She had mentioned casually, just before she had left him, that should young Pinkerton prove not to have the right gifts for the post, which needed at once social charm and scholarship, then she knew of a man. . . . Only, of course, she could not be sure that he would accept a job of this kind; he had had so much experience all round, and responsibility; and also, he was not used to being in a subordinate position . . . but still, he happened at present to have thrown up what he was doing, on some point of literary conscience, so he was at liberty; and perhaps she, Sophia, might be able to persuade him; but that was all very much in the air, merely based on the supposition that young Pinkerton was very young indeed, perhaps almost crudely young. . . .

[v]

Cyril Pinkerton proved, indeed, to have some quality of crudeness in his youth, by imagining, when Mr. Radlett's wire arrived, that this piece of good fortune was due entirely to his own brilliance, diplomacy and good statesmanship, in approaching the

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senior partner direct, instead of making his application to Mr. Mostyn, whom everyone knew had the acting brains and energies of the firm. Cyril's special horror was management by women; and he would at first have been indignant, and then frankly disbelieving, if anyone had told him that his own act would have remained entirely ineffective, save for the adroit manipulation of an unknown woman somewhere in the dark where he could not see it. . . . He thought he was the lord of chance, whereas, strangely enough, he was merely the victim of fear, Sophia's fear, Mr. Radlett's fear. . . . He owed his present exhilaration to a series of interlinking fears. Sophia Locke had been desperately afraid that the dissolution of the villa in Italy would lead inevitably to the destruction of her life as an enchantress. . . . And in front of that, joined to it by an invisible axle, was Ambrose Radlett's terror that he should become, first a nonentity, and then an object of contempt. . . . But: "I did it all," crowed Cyril, arrogantly unconscious of the impelling forces; unconscious that he was, like all of us, a self-seeking but a dependent individual.

He was really more pleased at having obtained this offer of a showy job, than at the actual prospect of the job itself. He knew his own restlessness, which was possibly a definite reaction from the father whom he had never loved, and who had received a testi-

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monial and a handsome timepiece for having been for twenty-five years punctually at the office at half-past nine. Young Pinkerton was of the generation that rejoiced in "stunts." To have impudently sought out old Mr. Radlett on the very morning of the funeral, so as to be sure of having forestalled any other applicants; to have flattered him by the assumption that with him rested, without question, the supreme authority of appointment—this was a stunt, and he had pulled it off. Elizabeth would think a lot of him for this. Elizabeth was his fiancée, at present staying with friends in Italy.

He would write to Elizabeth, now. He was just impetuously refilling his fountain pen, when another telegram was brought to him. By a curious coincidence, it was from Elizabeth herself; a command, imperiously worded, urging that Cyril should immediately apply to Mr. Radlett personally for his late father's post of literary manager with Messrs. Radlett and Mostyn. . . .

"Damn!" said Cyril, slowly and emphatically. He flung himself into an armchair, and in a babyish attempt to prove his scorn of peremptory orders sent to him, tore up the telegram into very minute fragments, and allowed them to flutter out from the open window. For a minute or two afterwards he could not have explained, even to himself, why the tele-

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gram had first caused him that instinctive pang of anger, followed by feelings of petulant childish disappointment. It was his old fear which had stirred. . . .

Why couldn't Elizabeth have left this to him? She was trying to manage him. He did his part all right without any promptings from her. He had achieved just the spectacular effect which ought to have found in her a breathless, admiring audience—and now she had spoilt it all by butting into a thing that he had already done.

What was the good of telling her, now? Anti-climax! She would never believe that her telegram had not been the initial cause of his appointment; he might explain, oh yes, he might explain, and she would say: "Did you, dear?" and about her, irritably he felt sure of it, would lurk eternally an air of complacence. He could almost imagine her talking to her friends about him, saying that Cyril had fine capacities but that he was not practical, and needed an energetic woman always behind him though never letting him know it—just as though a man didn't know it! They were a foe to man nowadays, these girls who think of everything, these clever, witty, competent girls. Elizabeth was pretty, and could be a darling, but he—would—not—be—managed! . . . for deep down in him, his nature whispered a warn-

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ing that he had an infinite capacity for being managed, for delivering himself into the hands of the enemy. . . .

The naughty child that was in young Pinkerton, got up and walked about the room. Presently, the corners of his mouth twitched mischievously. He had an idea. In his present mood, all that mattered, and far beyond the mere mattering of being literary manager at Radlett and Mostyn's, was the absurd necessity for impressing Elizabeth. As, by her beastly officiousness, she had destroyed the possibility that he might impress her by obtaining this post, well then, he would impress her by refusing it; that was Cyril Pinkerton!

—Rather a sensational thing to do, nowadays, when jobs were scarce! a swaggering piece of bravado, not unpleasant to his ego. In his excited imagination, he was turning down jobs by the score. . . . Anyhow, there was no great hurry about procuring something with a regular salary. According to his arrangement with Elizabeth, as soon as he was definitely making £300 a year, which matched her own unearned income, they could get married; but not before. He wanted to marry Elizabeth, but not yet, not yet . . . and he wanted to amaze Elizabeth, *now!*

. . . Each for himself—and it is not always worldly advantage that satisfies the soul's secret long-

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ing. Elworthy Pinkerton, for instance, had been only able to satisfy it by achieving a record of twenty-five years of punctuality at the office; not the timepiece, but the glory, he had wanted. . . .

Elworthy Pinkerton's son picked up the telephone, and asked for Regent 0118. After he had spoken to Mr. Radlett or to Mr. Mostyn, he would write to Elizabeth.

[VI]

". . . And *who* do you think got it for him, my dears?" explained a delighted Mrs. Croft, to a group of her Chelborough friends; "Why, Miss Locke! Sophia Locke—of all people!"

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PART IV
—AND GOD FOR US ALL!

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[I]

THEO read the telegram that Johnny had just passed across to her: "FRIGHTFULLY SORRY CANCEL MY LETTER RADLETT ALREADY GIVEN JOB TO ONE OF HIS OWN PETS DAMN HIM BUT CANNOT DO ANYTHING IN THE MATTER WRITING MOSTYN." . . .

[II]

"Comé, signore?" demanded 'Vanna, after a long pause. She was getting worried. What had she done, what had she omitted to do? Could she have displeased the signore?

. . . Theo realized that, instead of feeling a shock of disappointment, as might have been imagined, she felt absolutely light and glittering with relief; on tiptoe with mischief, too.

After all—yes, they had been saying "after all" ever since Bertie Mostyn's letter in the morning, but they would soon have done with it now—after all, this was a great occasion. Why should she not play up? In Italy you did not misuse nor purposely bungle, as in England, the opportunities for drama which Heaven sent you. In England, drama was bad form;

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in Italy—Besides, 'Vanna appreciated a gift so much the more, from the ceremony with which it was handed to her.

"Darling 'Vanna," said Theo, while Elizabeth and the captain, not yet knowing what was in the telegram, suddenly, in a last stir of fellowship, clasped hands under the table, waiting for the blow to fall. . . . "Darling 'Vanna," said Theo, "it has been decided here, to-night, at this table, because it is Ettore's festa, and because in five days we shall have been two years at Collina, it has been decided by the padrone, and myself, and il Capitano, and la signorina that we shall give you—what is it an honest woman most needs to keep her happy, 'Vanna? A good husband—"

"Good health," murmured 'Vanna, brokenly, "and —and—But it was only in talk that I said it, not thinking to ask for it, Signora. And . . . a . . . sewing-machine."

And it seemed to Theo not only essential, just then, that Giovanna should have her sewing-machine; but also the only true and final outcome of civil war. . . .

[III]

"What could have been the matter with us all?" murmured Theo, half-an-hour afterwards, sitting on the verandah, and watching the moon lift from the

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horizon, slowly to travel and dip towards the quiet line of hills on the north-west; "I never knew civilized people could be such devils."

"Continuity makes for content," Johnny surmised, sententiously; "It was the prospect of being shaken up, out of this, that upset us all. Lord, I'm glad we're staying!" and he puffed at his pipe with the air of a man who has plenty of time to do it in.

"I'm glad, too." Yet Elizabeth gave herself a little shake, deeper into the hammock, as though to shake away a memory that still clung too uneasily for comfort. She was not worrying about Cyril. Cyril would find something to do, some day; there was no hurry. She could wait—no need to be fretful or agitated any more, nor to send telegrams. She could wait, here in Italy, with Johnny and dear old Theo and Ted. A firefly travelled slowly past her line of vision. The air smelt warmly of heliotrope and night-scented stock and tobacco-plant; and in the kitchen 'Vanna was singing again, golden thoughts of the sewing-machine rippling through her voice. Italy! Italy was a good country! Elizabeth, like Theo, stretched her arms a little, and yielded to it. . . . "There's always an embryo quarrel lying low in every household," she said. "Sometimes it doesn't come bursting up to the top for years, or sometimes never. But it's there . . . sure as fate."

"All the same," Captain Locke, perhaps because

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he was older than the other three, could not forget quite so readily the day's behaviour, "I'd never have thought, you know, that civilized people, even when quarrelling, would go and—and—" He was not quite sure how to word it. It seemed so queerly far away already—"would go and give each other away, like we did," he finished. "It wasn't decent!"

Theo smiled across at him, encouragingly: "Go on, Ted. Let's tidy away all the ends of the day, so that they shan't trip us up and spoil to-morrow. What's worrying you still?"

"What *was* it?" he broke out, boyishly.

Elizabeth suggested: "'Vanna. We none of us could bear hurting her."

"That's very pretty," Theo mocked her. "Try again, and be honest."

"Our fundamental wolfing selves, then, prowling out into the open, for once. We didn't like the look of them, so we kept on pointing to the others: Johnny's self, and Theo's self, and Ted's self—they help me not to look at . . . my-self! Though my-self is up and rampant, all the time! Oh, we've been black-tempered devils—for half a day. But not worse than other human beings in the same state. Every quarrel, however trivial, contains all the quarrels that are older than the hills. The same qualities go loping to and fro, up and down. Let's accept it—and forget! Give me a cigarette, somebody!"

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"Yes—but look here," said the captain, as determined as Theo to try and pack away all slack ends of the dispute, before he settled down into the paradise of knowing that there need be no Sophia and no Chelborough for him in the future. "Look here, I thought we all liked each other so much. In fact, we do. We did, and we do. But there was an interval between—" He halted at that.

Johnny and Theo and Elizabeth, youngsters still, smiled wisely at one another . . . and then Theo enlightened him:

"Dear old Ted, do you suppose human beings ever like each other in a perfect, round, unbroken, golden ball of perfect affection, like the moon over there? Everybody says things about everybody. It's when things get loose, and get passed round, that the trouble begins. Is there anyone in the world about whom you, for instance, can assert with a clear conscience, that they can safely hear every word you've ever said about them, and know every thought that you've ever thought about them?"

"Yes!" shouted the captain, positively. And, after a moment's reflection: "Well—no . . ."

[IV]

Ettore was walking up the mule-track, side by side with the landlord of La Collina. The moon shook a

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silver light through the olives, on to Ettore's powerful and yet domesticated shoulders, on to his hard, round, straw hat; and on to the gesticulations of the wiry little Mephistopheles, who trotted a pace in the rear, flinging his hands this way and that:

"You understand, then—that large piece of land along the hill outside your garden—I want it cultivated. It's hard land—a great many rocks in it, old roots of trees—it will need much digging, great strength. Strength costs too many soldi for me, now. I am a poor man, I have had expenses this year—my wife's illness, my son's education, those houses that I have built, towards Porto Filippo. Spend, spend, spend—and no return! I would do what I could for everybody, but . . ."

Ettore nodded. "All the English are rich," he said. "If I tell them that I have discovered how that piece of land ought to have been included in their garden—if I suggest to them, I, that we should bring it under cultivation and plant artichokes there, and sell the artichokes at a profit, they will be pleased, they will see that I am watchful for their interests."

The landlord flung out a menacing, pointing finger: "But it is understood that in two years' time, when the land is fertile, it returns to me. Yes? I cannot allow you more than two years' profit on the artichokes; artichokes sell well. You will become rich,

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photographer; I, Ferrari, will have made you rich. You will not forget it? I have wished to be generous to you, because you are an honest man, but I must have it understood that in two years' time you discover how you have made a mistake about the land which the English have had cultivated. See—it belongs to the landlord, after all!"

"I make no mistakes, I!" retorted Ettore superbly. "And they will not believe it, when they hear that Ettore has made a mistake. No! The better way is così: When you make your claim, in two years, and they come to me, and they say: 'Ettore, is this true?'—then I wink at them, I reply: 'Si, si, si, si. It is true it belongs to Giotto Ferrari, this piece of land, and it must return to Giotto Ferrari now, without argument; but I, I knew all the time, when I claimed it for La Collina, and grew artichokes on it for La Collina, I knew that it was not ours in reality. But until we are found out, we surely benefit by our mistake? Look, signori, we have had two years' benefit from this piece of land; Ferrari should have spoken before!' "

They had reached the top of the mule-track, by now. Ettore paused and panted. His companion shook him warmly by both hands—it would have cost him five thousand lire, more than that, perhaps—and present outlay is always agony to an Italian!—to

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have got that piece of his waste property under proper cultivation, which now the English would obligingly do for him, and think themselves cunning fellows, into the bargain, for doing so. This photographer, he was a sound man, an honest man . . . not to be trusted, of course, but he, Ferrari, would see to it that the spoken contract was fulfilled at the end of two years. The photographer knew well enough that otherwise Ferrari could get him into ill repute, by spreading abroad this little quiet talk.

"Believe me, Puncini," he said, still shaking Ettore's hands, "you will win a large profit by selling those artichokes; even when you have parted with a little of it to the Signori, to content them for their expenses, still there will remain a large profit." He was of the type who nearly weeps at the idea of another man winning a large profit on anything, but in this case, it was plainly unavoidable. "Every day," he continued, emotionally, "you will thank me, a poor man, for what I am now doing for you. I think, perhaps, I should be given a percentage on the profits?"

Ettore smiled. "We will speak about that later." For, naturally, Ferrari knew that he would be given no percentage; had not a hope of it; nor could he press for it, lest Ettore should spread about the cunning arrangement by which the land should be

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cultivated for its owner without the owner paying a halfpenny towards it. "But now I must hurry along home. It is my Saint's Day, and three photographers, from San Remo, Porto Filippo and Savona, have been invited to dine with me at La Collina. I must help 'Vanna make the preparations. My compliments to your signora! Ciau!" he added, the usual formula for farewell.

"Ciau!" cried the other conspirator, gaily. "Buon' appetito!"

"The same to you!" responded Ettore, politely.

"Had I known it was your festa, I would have brought you a bouquet."

"Ten thousand thanks! I have received many bouquets to-day. I am much respected in Santa Nucia, I, and also in Alassio, and as far as Savona."

"That sees itself, dear friend, and not undeservedly. You are looking well, too. Yes, yes, you old rascal! You get fat on the English, while I remain lean, because I am an honest man."

And they both laughed, and struck each other on the chest.

"Ciau!"

"Ciau!"

. . . Ettore trudged on towards home. Keem and Uatti came rushing down the path to meet him, cir-

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cling and jumping about his legs, barking a welcome. 'Vanna, with her happiest face, stood on the terrace at the top of the path, plainly with good news to tell him.

A pleasant home, La Collina; and their signori were good signori! Ettore would protect them. He had a hard year behind him, but no one could say that he did not pay his debts, as a man with high principles should do; and now, for reward, there were two good years stretching alluringly in front of him. Presently, he would go and tell the signori about this accidental discovery, on their behalf, of that large stretch of land beyond the garden, which should be included in the Collina estate. . . . Undoubtedly, it would not be long before he would be able to give 'Vanna the sewing-machine she wanted. What a magnificent present!

Suddenly he was quite certain that his one object, when . . . adjusting the Signori's expenses, their first year at La Collina, had been to give 'Vanna a sewing-machine. His intentions regarding the third year, proved again that it was essential she should be given a sewing-machine. Essential, and also the only perfect, the only natural explanation and climax of his endeavours.

And as to give 'Vanna a sewing-machine was a legitimate desire on the part of a good husband, he

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need not bother his conscience with any further responsibility in the matter. . . .

Dinner! . . . He could hear the voices of the three photographers, lightly greeting Ferrari, as they passed him, by moonlight, at the foot of the mule-track. . . .

THE END

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